

激突の OBSTACLEシリーズ クセノナハト

川上 稔

イラスト／さとやす (TENKY)

協力／剣 康之

IV



Clash of Hexennacht - Volume 04

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IV



電撃文庫

Εν ἀρχῇ-ἦν-ὁ-λόγος,
καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν,
καὶ θεὸς-ἦν-ὁ-λόγος.



OBSTACLE Series

Clash of Hexennacht IV

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Design: Watanabe Kouichi (2725 Inc)

設定資料集

一部だよ！

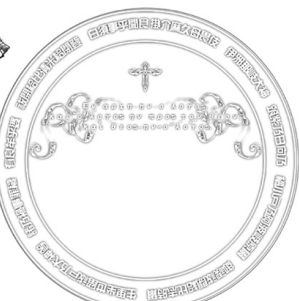
——というわけで、今回もヘクセンナハト開始前における、自分の手による資料関係とかデザインとかいろいろ開示。
イメージの補充になれば幸いです。(イラスト・解説：川上稔)

『ジオフレイム』



『全体』

全高三キロという大物ですが、速度は人間の等倍スケールより速いというトンデモです。それを支えるのは膨大な術式ですが、この大きさになると負担が大きいため、術式の軽減用という逆転指向で全体デザインが人とは違うものとなっています。両腕が長いのも、足先が細いのも、バランスをとりやすくするためですね。



『ステージ床』

各務と堀之内を合わせた上で円形化。そんなデザインのステージで、この上で二人が合わせて動いたとき、それを元に本体が動作します。



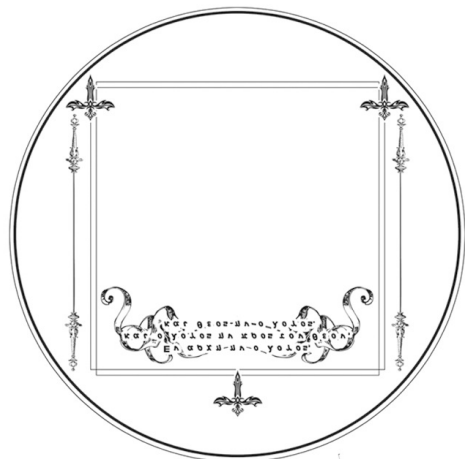
『顔』

仮面をかぶった女性、というイメージで。簡略化がされていますが、髪を仮面から離して下ろすと見栄えがいい、というのが思いつくのにかかりました。



『イメージ』

実は各務の設定よりも先に出来ていたのがこの一枚。ジオフレイムによる決着が先にアイデアとしてあったのです。



『ステージ床』

ステージ本体は円なのに、四角で区切った方が「格好いい」と考えるのが硝子スタイル……！ つまり手を加えないと気が済まない設定マニア系のデザインですが、それはステージ上であまり移動をせずに戦う、という物ぐさ作家のリアルでもあります。

『顔』

ジオフレイムが空間を持ったロングヘアで大人感出さなければ、こっちはちょっと空間詰めてショート系のヘアながら視線を隠すようなイメージで。額から上に伸びるラインが王冠と繋がっていて、顔よりも装飾を見る、という王権主張のデザインです。



【サタニックフレイム】



『全体』

他が聖騎士や巫女なら最強は女王型だよ、ということですが、意外と映画などの女王は体のラインが出た中世風のシンプルなものが多く、こちらは「王としての王女」というイメージでエリザベス一世などの衣装を参考にしました。王冠、そして玉座のような背負いもの、というデザインにしていますが、胴体部がベスト風なのは硝子にとって「大人の衣装」のイメージが各務のスーツに由来している、という設定です。

Preface

Title Page

ハートを破壊された

魔法少女は

敗北となる……！

川上稔

イラスト/さとやす(TENKY)
協力/剣康之

OBSTACLEシリーズ

ハートの
激戦の
ナハトIV

The magical girl whose heart is broken will lose!

Their Proof



『二人の証明』

「――しかし、貴女の話の聞いている限り、この世界は創作物という割に、私達は黒の魔女に作られた訳ではありませんのね」

中庭のテラス。テーブルセットの椅子から空を見上げながら堀之内が言うと、各務がメアリーから炭酸ジュースの缶を受け取りながら応じる。

「設定は設定、だ。この世界は、そこから動き出して、妹も介入して幾度となくヘクセンナハトを過ごした。省略や追加設定などはあろうけど、堀之内君を含むこの世界全体は妹が作った。想像の何代も後ということになろうね」

そうする、と信じるくらいには、各務に対して信頼感がある。一方、それも困るな、と頷いたのは、向かいの位置に座るハンターだ。彼女は両手を挙げ、

「だったらボクの実家の方がいろいろ雑だったのは、黒の魔女のせいじゃないのか……」

「私達の世界でも、歴史などにはあり、そこからの連綿を逆算したり口伝で調べると、大体二千年分くらいの大部分は、実在」として考慮出来たね。多くの場合、転機となるあたりに介入の可能性はあるのではないかと、

ハンターの横に座ったメアリーの言葉に、自分は成程、と視線を下ろす。

「何もかも、黒の魔女のせいにする訳にはいきませんわね」

「何か責任回避したいことでもあったのかね満子」

「その呼び方……!」

「……准将、まさか堀之内さんのそれ、黒の魔女の設定とか……」

ナイナイ、とハンターが手を横に振るのに、こちらも頷くだけだ。ただ気になるのは、

「各務の名は、黒の魔女の設定外ですわよね」

「私の名は、うちの祖父が、各務家というのだから、そろそろ鏡というのがいてもいいだろう、な!?」とつけたらしくてな。各務家初の名だ。祖父がそれを言うと、母が睨んだ後で、相手のことを写し、見本となる人となるように、です。と訂正するのがルーチンでな」

「……それ、どっちがルーチンとなってるギャグの方だよ各務」

「祖父の方ですわよ」

言える。というか解る。なぜなら、

「黒の魔女は硝子。――姉が相手を写すならば、妹は相手の本心を見透かしたり、理解して貰える子になるように、ということですよ」

「流石の推理だね堀之内君。硝子のやつは、だからこそか、解りやすくてなあ」

だから油断したのだが、と各務は苦笑の後で、思いついたようにこちらを見た。

「堀之内君は、御母堂が充代。この代で充つる、という意味でつけられた名を、しかし御母堂は次代に向けてのものと考えたのだらうね。つまり、充たすを自分の役目とし、完了するという意味で取って子には、代。をつけなかった。故に充たされた器が君だ、満子」

「子についてはよ……!?」

いいではないかね、と各務が言った。

「転機が黒の魔女の設定介入なら、連綿は自然なこと、平和の証だ。――連綿を示す名を得たとき、君達親子は平和であった。そういうことだよ堀之内君。」

私は君を写し間違えているかね?」

“But from what you’ve said, we weren’t really created by the Black Witch even though this world is her creation.”

Horinouchi looked up into the sky and spoke from the seat at a table on the courtyard terrace. Kagami responded while accepting a can of soda from Mary.

“A setting is only a setting. This world was set into motion from there and my sister has intervened in the many Hexennachts since. There are sure to have been some omissions and additions to the setting, but this entire world, including you, is from several generations after what my sister ‘imagined’.”

Horinouchi trusted Kagami enough to just say “Is that so?” and take her at her word. Meanwhile, Hunter said “That’s kind of a problem in itself” from the opposite seat. She then raised both hands.

“Then is it not the Black Witch’s fault that my family seemed kind of sloppily put together?”

“Even my world had a history,” explained Mary next to Hunter. “Calculating back from that and investigating the oral traditions suggested that about 2000 years’ worth of that history ‘actually existed’. In most cases, we considered she might have intervened at the major turning points.”

Horinouchi looked down while thinking, “I see.”

“I guess we can’t just blame everything on the Black Witch.”

“Is there something you would like to dodge responsibility for, Manko?”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Brigadier General, are you saying that aspect of Miss Horinouchi was part of the Black Witch’s setting?”

“Not a chance,” said Hunter while shaking her hands side to side.

Horinouchi simply nodded, but something caught her attention.

“Kagami, your name would be outside the Black Witch’s setting, wouldn’t it?”

“My name supposedly comes from the fact that my grandfather said, ‘Our family name already sounds like it means mirror^[1], so it’s about time we actually gave someone that name, right!?’ I am the first in the family to take the name. Whenever he would tell that story, the running gag was for my mother to glare at him and correct him by saying, ‘We named her that so she would become a good role model who would be a reflection of whoever she is with.’ ”

“...Which one of them worked to turn that into a running gag?”

“Her grandfather.”

Horinouchi was certain of that. And she understood. After all...

“The Black Witch is named Shouko. ...If the older sister was a reflection of the other person, the younger sister must be a girl who would give a clear view of the other person’s true nature and work to understand it. Isn’t that right?”

“Well deduced, Horinouchi. And that is what makes Shouko so easy to understand. ...And why I let my guard down.” Kagami smiled bitterly and then

looked to Horinouchi as if something had just occurred to her. “Horinouchi, your mother was named Mitsuyo. She would have been given that name in the hopes that she would ‘fulfill’ things in her ‘generation’, but I bet she was more focused on the next generation herself. She saw that fulfillment as her role and so she removed the ‘generation’ from her daughter’s name to say it was already complete. Thus, you are the container that has already been filled, Manko.”

“She did not add the ‘ko’ to the end!”

“What does that matter?” asked Kagami. “If the turning points are the Black Witch’s intervention, then continuation is a natural thing and a sign of peace. ... Your connected names make you a parent and child of peace. That is what this means, Horinouchi. Or am I reflecting you incorrectly?”

Character Page



Black Witch

Spell Type: Creation

Affiliation: None

Combat Frame: Queen

Device: Long Sword Type

Traits: Unfortunately, almost nothing is known about the Black Witch.

In fact, most of those involved in the previous Hexennacht had their memories erased by her. But there are still some things worth writing about and her overall outline can be deduced from the people’s general impressions and individual memories.

She uses a Queen-type of Frame. She is the only one in the history of witches who has been able to use that type. It is thought that is because she was the source of witches and witches prepared their power in order to fight that queen. Also, a witch's jinx says the same words cannot be repeated. So if there is already a queen, it would be difficult for another one to appear.

So what does that mean? It makes you wonder what kind of job would be able to oppose a queen. I guess it would have to be a revolutionary...! No, that's too vague. Guevara! (sound effect) But I think that's a good starting point, so to give it more thought, maybe a public prosecutor would be more modern! But that would just look like someone in a suit, so that's no good! A judge wouldn't work since they take forever to make a judgment and have to listen to what the other person has to say. So maybe the best job would be someone with jurisdiction, individual discretion, and the backing of god? How about that?

(The previous text came from the external affairs team of Shihouin Academy's PR Committee.)

"I have yet to be rebuked."

Restaurant Page



“Brigadier General, please stop placing your order by saying, ‘I want everything from here to here’.”

Geo Frame Page



“Here I go.”

“I shall go even further than you.”

“Then...let’s go together.”

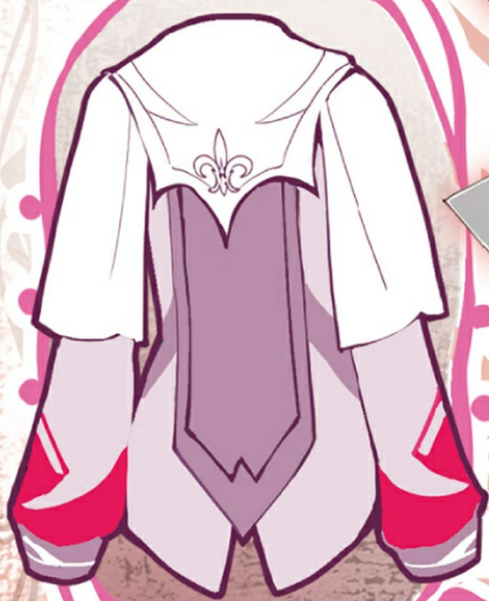
Uniform Page



四法印学院特待科制服

特待科について

- 位置** 正門入って中庭超えて奥
- 校舎** 空中テラスからしか入れない
- 特徴** 特殊能力



-rear-

特待科

●由来

特待科の発生は実のところ普通科より早いものでした。無論、学校の発足時には四科全てそろっていましたが、元々、魔女とは特殊性の個々というものですから、普通科という概念自体が考慮されていなかったのです。ただ学長の判断により普通科が設けられ、ランカー戦の最終決戦は特待科と普通科の代表によるものだったことは覚えておくべきでしょう。つまり魔女の特殊性は、普通となっていたのです。

さて特待科の制服は、由来からすれば四科の中でのベースになります。特徴とすべきはその色合いですが、実は特待科の制服はパーソナルカラーが許可されています。これは特待科がエースである証左であると同時に、特待科の個性が一つに縛られるものではないことも密接です。だって着ているものの色で術式が使えなくなるとか、普通、無いやん……。術式科だってもうちょっと汎用性あるよな……。なもんで、パーソナルカラーは強制じゃないので注意。迂闊に野良ランカー戦をやったら相手が特待科、とか、年三、四件あります。

なお、服装自体は普通科と非常に近いです。普通科のものにケープを与え、袖口などの流体を通すラインを強化しているくらいでしょうか。ケープは防護性が高く、首元などを覆う形、これは戦闘を想定しているもので、ケープの脇のカッティングも、腕を前後に振り出す動きを阻害しないものです。

ある意味、前へクセナハトから即後の時期、エース用に考案されたものなので、他科よりもシンプルかつ戦闘主眼とも言えます。あ、でも、これに遅れて、しかし普通科の方で初採用となったものがありました。ご存じの通り胸部立体縫製です。ええ。

※モデルはフルール・四法印さんに御願いいたしました。



Shihouin Academy Honors Division Uniform

About the Honors Division

Location: Past the courtyard from the main entrance

School Building: Can only be entered through the midair terrace

Special Traits: Special Powers

Origin: The Honors Division was actually created before the General Division. Of course, all four divisions existed by the time the school was created, but witches have always had their special traits, so no one had considered something like the General Division. But the General Division was created on the Headmaster' decision and it is worthwhile to remember that the last of the Ranker Battles was between the representatives of the Honors Division and the General Division. That means the specialness of witches has become normal.

Now, the Honors Division uniform is actually the one the other divisions have based theirs on. The most notable trait is the coloration, but personal colorings are actually allowed for the Honors Division uniform. That is proof that the Honors Division is for aces, but it is also closely related to how the Honors Division is not tied to a single trait. I mean, it isn't normal for you to be unable to use your spells if you're wearing the wrong color... Even the Spell Division is more standardized than that... Oh, and the personal colorations aren't required, so be careful. About 3 or 4 times a year, someone carelessly starts a Ranker Battle and then finds out their opponent is from the Honors Division.

Now, the uniform itself is extremely similar to the General Division one. It pretty much takes the General Division uniform, adds a cape, and reinforces the lines on the sleeves and such that allow ether to flow through. The cape has a high defensive power and it covers the neck and such. It's designed for battle, so it's cut around the arms so it won't obstruct their movement.

This was the uniform considered for the aces shortly after the previous Hexennacht, so in a way it's a lot simpler and more focused on combat than the other divisions. However, that delayed its completion and the General Division

uniform was the first one adopted. As you know, chest-accentuating stitching is available. Yes.

*We asked Fleur Shihouin to model the uniform.

Honors Division

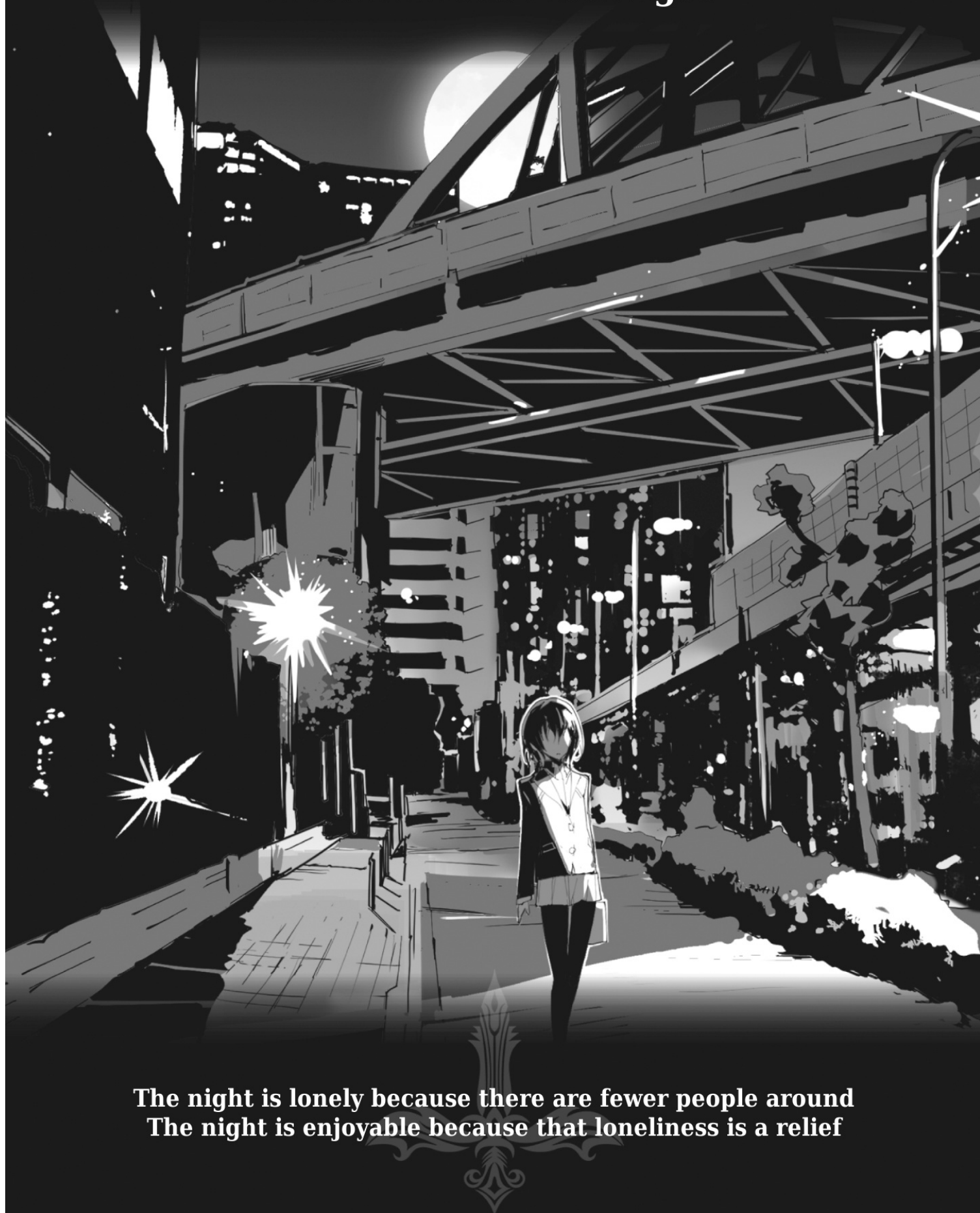
He who holds no aspirations will not find happiness.

—Aeschylus of Greece

Prologue: A Walk in the Moonlight

Prologue

“A Walk in the Moonlight”



The night is lonely because there are fewer people around
The night is enjoyable because that loneliness is a relief

The night is lonely because there are fewer people around

The night is enjoyable because that loneliness is a relief

A girl stood in a city with a view of the moon.

She was on the outskirts of the city. She walked toward the city's lights using a sidewalk that began at the river mouth. Her gray uniform blew in the autumn night wind.

Her shoulder-length hair fluttered as the wind carried in the mixed scents of the river and the sea.

"Amazing. ...I'm glad I put so much effort into it since it came out so well."

"I personally can't recommend this much, but I suppose it's valuable for you to see it."

"That's right," said the girl with a smile on her lips and in her eyes as she viewed the city.

Her black eyes captured the nighttime lights before her that took the form of a city.

"I'm going to keep going."

"I'm sure you would do so even if I told you not to."

"Ha ha. Should we spend the night somewhere?"

"You do *not* have permission to spend the night!"

"Yeah, I said it because I knew you'd say that."

"Why do you always get so energetic when you use your imagination?"

"Because it feels like I can arrive at something even better if I do."

The girl directed the words "don't worry" toward her left side. She carried a white leather handbag there and a voice spoke from within.

"We'll head back together. Of course, we arrived together too."

"Thanks. What does this feel like to you?"

“It’s the same thing you always do. It’s like flipping through a book and pointing to a word on a page.”

As they walked and approached, the city arrived at their sidewalk. It felt more like it was accepting their walk than spreading out before them. The scents of the river and the sea were overpowered by the sounds of cars, trains, and people living their lives.

The sounds, lights, smells, sensations, atmosphere, and aura were all the product of the people who lived there.

The girl entered that manmade amalgam. She had already passed the increased density of light that acted as a border. So...

“We’ve arrived in Yokohama,” said the girl.

“We should have gone to the center to start with.”

“I wouldn’t be able to bear that. I’d die.”

“Stop exaggerating,” said the voice from her side. “Look. Over there.”

The sidewalk ran along the river, but there were several buildings across the road on the other side. At an even interval between the buildings, information towers displayed spell circles.

A certain announcement scrolled across one of them along with some news and ads from sponsors.

“3 days until Hexennacht,” read the girl.

“That’ll be 2 days once dawn arrives.”

A map from Tokyo Bay to the ocean off of Kanagawa was displayed along with footage of a woman with long white hair, a black suit, and an eyepatch.

Some roads on the map were marked with red lines and those extended toward western Tokyo, western Kanagawa, or northern Shizuoka. They were...

“Evacuation routes?”

“Are the city’s people evacuating?”

“It looks like they’ll start evacuating by block tomorrow.” The girl looked around. “I would think they would have to evacuate sooner, but let’s just

assume that means a lot of witches live in this region.”

“I really don’t think you should just assume you’re always right.” The voice from the bag under her arm spoke quietly. “You have to make sure you’re right in the end.”

“Only 3 days remained until Hexennacht.

“On that day, the world would settle things with the Black Witch. They would do battle with and destroy the very person who created this world and sealed herself in the moon.

“That was the day on which mankind had continually lost and received incredible damage.

“It always occurred at the end of October.

“The official date had been determined suddenly but also quite late, and everyone knew why.

“One of the Troika had been lost.

“The Troika were the 3 witches who had competed to the end over becoming the representative for the previous Hexennacht.

“The one who won that competition, Horinouchi Mitsuyo, had already been lost in the previous Hexennacht.

“But one of the remaining two, Cerisier Shihouin, headmaster of Shihouin Academy where the Ranker Battles were fought, was no longer with them.

“This was due to the loss of Fleur Shihouin, the previous Rank 1 in the witches’ Ranker Battles which were used to determine who would fight on Hexennacht.

“Cerisier had been her daughter Fleur’s servant, but she could not ‘last’ any longer.

“She left the fate of the world up to a new Rank 1 who had summoned the Geo Frame, the ultimate witch’s Frame that had also been summoned by Horinouchi Mitsuyo during the previous Hexennacht.

“Thus, Lisbeth, the last of the Troika and the new Headmaster of Shihouin Academy, decided on the date of Hexennacht.

“...How does that sound as narration for the PR Committee’s documentary, Horinouchi?”

“Please stop writing your own script! And Aunt Lisbeth has called for us, so we need to gather in the courtyard!”

A cage surrounded the sky.

It was a circular cage with a diameter of about 3km.

Each of the bars on the cage was a long gunblade.

They were 500-meter Magino Device’s colored a uniform black. 1000 of them were arranged in a circle which surrounded a great expanse of water and the structure that floated there.

That structure was Shihouin Academy.

The floating island’s giant academic facility was not functioning properly.

Classes were in session. A look inside the windows of the school buildings positioned in the cardinal direction would show teachers speaking in front of their lecterns and writing words or drawing diagrams on the blackboards.

But the classes were not academic in nature.

In the General Division building to the south, a teacher in glasses spread her arms in front of her students.

“Listen up. Just like last time, we predict the Black Witch will scatter her minions over a wide area from the sky. You need to consider the possibility that your post will be destroyed or evacuated when that happens.”

They were being taught the means to survive and to fight.

Each division was learning a distinct witch survival method.

“Listen up.”

The General Division teacher raised her hands which had countless stiff scars on them.

Her hands had more scars than fingers. When the students saw that, they gasped, nodded, and continued listening.

“Listen, everyone. This here...is an example of success. Because I’m still alive.”

In that case...

“If your post is destroyed, is your best option to join the U.A.H. troops stationed in a nearby region? You might think so, but you would be wrong. After all, it is likely they will be in combat. So what should you do in that case?”

A student with pine leaves and branches on her desk raised her hand. She had white skin and blonde hair.

“Shihouin students are a part of U.A.H., but we also have our own exclusive communications channel. I think it would be crucial to first search for members of the Special Equipment Division posted nearby.”

Why was that? The answer was given in the Special Equipment Division building to the west.

In front of the students’ lab tables, a teacher in a lab coat drew a map of Japan on the blackboard and drew a horizontal red line between Tokyo Bay and the ocean off of Kanagawa.

“You will be positioned along this line. You are to protect Japan from there. But listen. There are 2 problems about that.”

She tapped the line she had drawn.

“The first is that, assuming things are the same as last time, the Black Witch distributes destruction by dropping down her minions. Last time, she dropped black candy boxes which exploded, but even the small ones spread ‘destruction’ over a diameter of 300 meters. That is the first problem, but the other one is based on your own abilities.”

Meaning...

“The Special Equipment Division is an engineering school. You have trained in two things: combat ability and how to magically construct and repair defensive

formations. But that is why you will form the foundation of our defenses while retreating and why you must take command to prevent our formations from collapsing.”

“You’re telling us to be leaders?”

“Not telling you to. I am saying you will have no choice but to.” The teacher smiled bitterly. “I mean, if you see a collapsed formation or a structure that could probably function as a shield with a little work, would you be able to ignore it? But the truth is that only you have that kind of discernment. You need to understand what that means before heading home today because it’s too late once you’re actually out there.”

“Wait a second, sensei. ...In that case, well, I guess the General Division isn’t too surprising since a lot of them are only witches for fun, but what about the Spell Division?”

The answer to that was being given in the Spell Division’s school building.

There, an old woman in a black coat walked around the classroom.

“Listen. You all have a role to play. The Special Equipment Division will end up being defenders and assisting in retreat. But what will you be doing? Defending? Assisting in retreat? Or guiding people? Surely you don’t intend to divine people’s destinations or love lives on the battlefield. You’re not going all the way out there just to determine tomorrow’s future from some beer foam, are you? C’mon, you tell me the answer.”

“Of course! ...We are to attack. We are to take the initiative and make accurate and effective strikes, especially while the enemy is approaching from outside our field of vision.”

“No, that’s not the answer.” The elderly teacher rubbed the student’s head. “Only a small fraction of you will be able to do anything that cool on the battlefield. And as one of those who couldn’t, let me tell you the real answer.”

She slowly pointed toward the ceiling.

“The moon is there. Ever since the previous Hexennacht, my right hand’s nails have always been able to accurately point to the moon. So...”

So...

“If you aren’t sure what to do and think it’s hopeless and if you think you still have some strength left, then remember this: fire toward the moon. They always come from the moon, so you have a much better chance of hitting them that way than by making a poor horizontal or homing shot or attempting some kind of martial arts. ...Listen. The Spell Division is the foundation of our offense. You’re allowed to use this world’s most advanced magic for violence. Isn’t that the best? So don’t just cling to your magic power and die. But with that in mind, don’t forget this: if you survive, you might just get another shot at this. That will mean spending another pathetic and bitter 10 years on this, but you won’t even get that if you die.”

She said “listen” once more.

“Each team will receive a single member of the Special Equipment Division for reinforcement and support. You’re good communicators, right? Yes, here is where you can use your fortunetelling and foresight. I believe I have raised the world’s greatest attackers with social skills to match. The Honors Division tends to have trouble with that last part, though.”

“But, sensei, the Honors Division...”

“Yes, they lost their most powerful Ranker. Fleur Shihouin has lost her ability to grasp ether, so she is actually weaker than a normal person. I wonder what they’re going to do about that.”

They all nodded in agreement with that.

Fleur had been at the top of the worldwide witch ranking, but she had lost both the Ranker Battle and her power. The greatest advantage of the Ranker Battles was how the losers were not lost, but that did not apply to this result.

“That means everything will likely be focused on the current Rank 1, but how will the Honors Division view that?”

The question was also asked within the Honors Division.

“Sensei.”

That voice came from a closed white space without windows. Fewer than 20

witches sat in floating chairs with armrests.

A few of them kept their hands busy by repeatedly opening and closing locks or making random structures out of floating building blocks, but one of them asked a question.

“Will we be useful at all?”

“Well, all of you have unique powers,” said the sweater-wearing teacher. “But that is why we have long been thinking about how to use your abilities. Your deployment this time will take that into account and the witches in command will have been instructed how to use you, so you don’t need to worry. Of course, that’s what makes it such a disappointment that we lost Fleur who had such incredible power in combat.”

The teacher said “but” again.

“Witches are people. You and we are people. We are analog and cannot be reproduced no matter how many gears you put together. ...We can’t blame someone if circumstances and happenstance led them to lose their power.”

“Then...” said a girl holding an origami crane in the air.

Her blue eyes looked to the teacher.

“Do we just have to place all our expectations in the current Rank 1?” She took a breath. “They might have a greater power than Fleur, but we don’t know if they can win. I mean, that Geo Frame they summoned was already defeated 10 years ago.”

“That’s the question I think we’re all asking right now.”

During the Hexennacht 10 years before, Horinouchi’s mother Mitsuyo had been the representative, but she had lost to the Black Witch. And she had summoned the greatest witch’s Frame known as a Geo Frame.

“The daughter is using the same technique that was defeated last time. ...Can they really win like that?”

With that question, the crane took flight.

The white origami crane flew lightly through the white classroom without flapping its wings.

“Ah.”

It suddenly opened up.

It did not tear or come apart. It unfolded, and...

“———”

The blue sky spread out within that closed white space. Something opened with a sound like struck cloth.

“A window!? But those were only included during the initial planning stage!”

As the teacher asked that, everyone turned back toward the blue sky and saw something there: a giant blue and vermilion weapon.

Two Magino Devices, which measured more than 500 meters, had appeared in the sky above Shihouin Academy’s central courtyard.

“Hold it! Kagami Kagami! How dare you!! We’re having enough trouble with the evacuation schedule for this area changing on such short notice, so why are you doing something so noticeable and threatening!?”

As the woman’s voice passed in one ear and out the other, Horinouchi watched the silver-haired and uniformed girl in front of her shrug.

...Now she’s done it.

Horinouchi thought this was absolutely ridiculous, but the other girl did not notice her glare. Kagami simply ignored Lisbeth who stormed quickly over from beyond the courtyard.

“What do you think, Horinouchi? I used the ether I was given and the designs you let me see to summon both Dikaiosyne and Akerindou simultaneously! What do you think!?”

What did she think? There was only one answer to that.

“How in the world did you do that?”

“You cannot tell!?” Kagami struck a pose with her hands and elbows bent. “I was told I could do what I wanted with the ether, so I simply took control of all the ether that is normally collected using the engines. I made the whole thing

all at once! The entire Device! I always preferred bananas, but Shouko is so narrow-minded and only allowed the production of strawberries.”

...Umm.

It took an extra leap of logic to figure out what that idiot had done.

After all, the rules of this world did not entirely apply to her. So...

“You secured the ether needed to summon the Device without using the engines?”

“Yes, that is correct, Horinouchi. It was a request from Lisbeth who is running over here right now. To confirm the Device repair technique I used in the battle against Mary, she wanted to see how much of Dikaiosyne and Akerindou I could ‘construct’.”

Horinouchi understood what that meant because she had checked with Lisbeth about it earlier.

“That’s to see how much of a Device you can repair with your crafting ability, right?”

“Indeed it is!” Kagami spread her arms wide with the 2 summoned Magino Devices behind her. “With my power, I can repair and even create the Devices so long as I have sufficient ether.”

“Hehhh.”

Horinouchi looked to the voice from her right shoulder.

“...Suzaku, was that you?”

The servant intentionally looked the other way and made fake-sounding bird cries, but its identity did not matter at the moment. But just as the Suzaku’s comment was meant to point out, there were some problems with Kagami’s crafting.

First of all...

“Milady! This is the mainland team! Why are you summoning your Magino Devices!? The evacuating vehicles were so distracted they crashed, the trains suddenly lost power and stopped, and U.A.H.J. sent us a message saying, ‘what

is it this time'!"

"Tell them it's 'the usual'. You must maintain your presence of mind."

"Well done, milady!"

With Hexennacht the day after the next, evacuation orders had been sent out for the area from Shihouin Academy to the ocean of Kanagawa where the seal would be established. The same was true for the residents along the east-west line where damage was expected from the "reinforcements" summoned by the Black Witch.

They could have done this earlier, but most of Japan was still reconstructing. If those areas could not function for long periods of time, it would cause losses from something other than direct damage. So it had all been calculated out so those areas could remain active right up to the limit. They would also have been preparing everything for evacuation as that limit approached.

"They apparently redid their evacuation preparations last night almost on a whim," said Horinouchi. "So those areas are a little on edge."

"Ho ho? Then the sudden appearance of our Devices must have gone a long way toward improving their morale."

"...It would seem they're panicking a little because they think Hexennacht might have started early."

"My, aren't they quick to jump to conclusions." Kagami smiled bitterly. "Then again, I hear most of those evacuating are children and the elderly because approximately 1.2 million of the other witches and men with spell training will be assisting from the coast of Tokyo Bay to the Kamakura region. It sounds so incredible."

"Thanks to Shihouin Academy's presence, all of the schools in the reconstructed areas have classes in those things."

For the past 10 years, a foundation for opposing Hexennacht had been established even at the governmental level.

Everyone from high school age to age 50 would generally remain to combat the disaster during Hexennacht. The women as attackers and the men as

defenders.

If the Black Witch called in her “reinforcements”, U.A.H. would handle it. But the local people would provide backup for U.A.H. while also handling the disasters and human damage caused by those reinforcements.

The need to protect your own city was a constant lesson in the reconstructed regions.

U.A.H. would make up for their anxiety about intercepting the actual enemies, so they both made up for what the other lacked.

...So even if a lot of people are evacuating, we don't have to worry too much about them.

It was hardly surprising that those evacuees would be surprised and concerned when Kagami used her crafting ability to create 2 Devices without warning.

“Heyyy, Kagami, Horinouchi,” said Hunter’s voice. “The internet is going nuts about something.”

“Yes, I suppose they would be,” was all Horinouchi could say.

But Kagami’s crafting had another problem beyond this kind of event.

“Now, then.”

Horinouchi put her hands on her hips and turned back toward Kagami who only tilted her head.

The look on Kagami’s face said “Is there a problem?”, so Horinouchi pointed at the 2 Magino Devices overhead.

“Listen,” she said. “Repairing them without using their actual ‘mold’ and just creating the whole thing at once is definitely amazing. In fact, it seems to reject the very foundation of our techniques. But you won’t be able to activate the engines when they’re made like that.”

...From a technical aspect, what she’s doing is on the level of a god.

Horinouchi could not help but enviously wish she had the same power

because this crafting ability allowed one to directly convert ether into a desired form.

While Horinouchi would use spells and the engines to smoothly process the ether in stages, this was more like taking a giant hand to knead out some clay.

...It's just plain ridiculous.

It broke the rules of witches.

When making her giant Device, any witch would first use ether to create the engine system needed to support the gathering and circulation of the necessary amount of ether.

Looking at it like a human body, it was like creating the circulatory and respiratory systems first and creating the rest while sending blood and oxygen to the entire body.

That drastically reduced the burden and stress to a lot of the components when compared to making it all at once.

After all, that meant instantly creating a structure measuring more than 500 meters long.

It was difficult for an individual's skills to secure the necessary amount of ether and to periodically send it to the various parts of the structure.

Also...

"The engines have enough power to create the rest from scratch, but if you try to activate the entire thing at once, the strain will be too great and it will forcibly shut down."

"You mean it starts in low gear and rises to top gear by the time the entire Device has been made?"

"So you understand it intellectually at least."

"My engines took yours into consideration...well, they were mostly copied straight from yours, so I leave a lot of that up to Dikaio."

"Then..."

Something about Kagami's crazy abilities bothered Horinouchi a bit, but she

put it off until later.

She opened a performance graph of her engine system.

“It might sound like you can just increase the output of the low gear, but starting with too much power right away puts a real burden on the engine system itself.”

“And what do you do about that?”

“You prepare a secondary engine system to act as a starter for the primary engine system.”

In other words, they would create a small engine to turn the large engine.

In response, Kagami looked up at the giant sword and bow floating in the sky.

“That sounds like a pain. ...But even with that, there is another problem, is there not?”

She knew the answer already, but she still asked it. Of course, Horinouchi went along with it by shrugging and answering.

“The Device’s ether pathways will be destroyed if it receives too powerful an ether circulation right away. It’s like a sudden spike in blood pressure.”

“How do you avoid that with Akerindou?”

“Accumulated experience,” she said. “Witch techniques are always being reformed, but that happens on a personal level as well.”

As soon as she explained that, someone grabbed Kagami’s shoulders from behind.

“Kagami Kagami! I can’t believe you!!”

It was Lisbeth.

Lisbeth had predicted that this would not happen.

She now realized that had been far too naïve, but she blamed her mistake on assuming Kagami would have anything resembling common sense.

...How much can you repair Dikaiosyne and Akerindou using your crafting

ability?

Asking that had been the problem.

She had guessed the girl *could* do this much.

When predicting the accuracy and scope of Kagami's crafting ability, she had only needed to imagine the girl was the god who created their world.

But she had carelessly assumed Kagami *would* not go this far.

After all...

"I can't believe you! You forcibly stole that ether, didn't you!?"

"Forcibly? How rude, Lisbeth. ...I merely opened things up and found it there, so I took it."

"Took it from where!?"

She had received reports from within the school that everything from windows to cabinets had unlocked and "opened".

The same thing had happened when Kagami came to this world, but this was different.

"What did you *open*!?"

As soon as she asked that, several spell circles appeared next to her face. There were 7 in all. Each one was an emergency transmission.

...From the surrounding Magino Devices!?

She looked up into the sky just as the voices reached her.

"Mistress! I'm sorry, but I can't hold on any longer!"

"Emergency! ...What is this? Some kind of malfunction!? Or..."

"C17 through C24, evacuate to the surface!"

It was impressive that none of them were screaming. They were surprised, but they were handling the situation even as light exploded in the sky.

More than 1000 Magino Devices surrounding Shihouin Academy and 7 of them suddenly self-destructed.

The Device management spell reports Lisbeth had seen on the way here had told her what this was. And...

“Lisbeth. Even if they are mass-produced, you should not use the same name for so many of them.”

“...Did you ‘open’ them by using the name of that block of Devices!?”

“I needed the ether. Dikaiosyne and Akerindou each seem to need as much ether as a bit more than 3 of your mass-produced models.”

“Your crafting is more wasteful than you might think, so I believe the actual amount is more like 2.7.”

The person more familiar with the girl made a correction.

But as the Devices scattered in the sky, a voice cried out beyond the trees surrounding the courtyard and the other Devices moved to fill the newly created hole and retain the overall balance.

They would not panic and make themselves look bad.

But the situation was still quite out of the ordinary.

...She broke down the Devices starting from the “name”?

The concept of a “true name” required caution among witches.

Names were the definition of the thing itself. All things physically “existed”, but they also received a name to “exist” as something with meaning.

Give a name to an animal and it became a pet. The name given to a building could turn it into anything from a rundown shack to a frontline base.

Also, the namer became the parent of the named and they gained the right to control it.

From a magic perspective, the name of the magic user could be a difficult issue. If you knew your opponent’s name, the ether could better reach your opponent and produce greater power against them. But if your opponent knew your name, they could control your spells via your name instead of via the spell itself.

Of course, any higher Ranker would have protections applied to their name to

ensure it was grounded. But...

“The internal structure of the Devices was supposed to have multiple names for the various parts to increase their defenses.”

“In other words, you used multiple passwords.”

“They were linked together, so controlling just one part shouldn’t have been able to stop the whole.”

“I did not *stop* them. I *opened* them, Lisbeth.” Kagami shrugged. “I mean, there was no need to stop them. I wanted the ether as a material, not to control your devices. So...”

So...

“I saw it when you were fighting Fleur near the main gate. When Fleur’s attack destroyed the blade, the individual parts had spells built in to direct the explosions inwards and thus avoid damaging their surroundings. From there, I only had to read the text written on the spell circles.”

“So you found the name and ‘opened’ them?”

“Precisely, Lisbeth! You catch on quickly!”

Beyond Kagami, Horinouchi placed a finger next to her head and spun it in a large circle.

...Um, yes, that’s about right...

The threat here was not a difference in skill or quality as it had been when Lisbeth had taken on Cerisier and Mitsuyo.

...She used the name as a hook to “open” it?

What Kagami had done could simply be described as follows:

“You discovered the ‘name’ of something that isn’t even a door, but you still used the control provided by that ‘name’ to use it like a door, didn’t you?”

Using that, she could also “open” people, weapons, the sea, or the sky like a door.

Lisbeth had heard Kagami’s ability was crafting, but that was not actually the case.

“You have the power to control phenomena...and the ether is no more than the fuel and material used for it.”

“That is correct. ...I have a pen in my hand and this world is my notebook. I can make anything I want. But I need the proper motivation and the pen I use runs out of ink very quickly.”

“You shouldn’t refer to someone else’s Device as your spare ink,” said Horinouchi.

You’re the one that just defined it that way, thought Lisbeth, but it was an accurate description.

As a result, 2 Devices had appeared and 7 others had been lost.

...Creating 7 of them all at once is going to be a pain...

The idiot would just keep making them and destroying them, but securing that much ether would affect the amount of ether in the surrounding ley lines. That was why Shihouin Academy was located in the middle of Tokyo Bay where it would have relatively little effect on anything else. U.A.H.’s European headquarters were in the mountains for the same reason.

We should get the help of the 7th Fleet at Yokosuka to do this out at sea, thought Lisbeth before Horinouchi spoke up.

“But Aunt Lisbeth?”

“Don’t call me ‘aunt’.”

“Lisbeth.”

That’s not great either, she thought, but then Kagami whispered in Horinouchi’s ear.

“You must not rush things, Horinouchi. People are slower to make decisions as they age. And what you call someone can be dangerous as it is connected to their name. So, Horinouchi, let us decide what is best here. ...What is your relationship with Lisbeth?”

“She’s an old friend of my mother’s, so I’ve always called her my aunt.”

“I see. And what is the safest thing to call her?”

“Well...Lisbeth, I suppose.”

“I see. Then it would be best to put those two together! Go for it!”

“...Aunt Lisbeth.”

“Damn you two...!”

The two turned their backs and ran about 7 steps away as she swung her right fist down, but she was also painfully aware of how much Horinouchi had changed.

...I'm not sure if Mitsuyo would have liked this change, though.

She knew Mitsuyo would forgive her that much of a criticism.

But then Horinouchi asked a question.

“So, Second Headmaster, why did you have Kagami do this nonsense? Hexennacht is only 2 days away.”

“Well,” began Lisbeth.

...2 days away, hm?

How had it been 10 years before? She remembered working to cheer them up so Mitsuyo would not be worried, but she now realized it was she who had been worried.

And Horinouchi would remember what had happened 10 years before.

So Lisbeth had a question for her.

“Mitsuru. We weren't doing this at this stage 10 years ago, were we?”

“At our home, we were living relatively normally. My mother was giving me my normal spell training, teaching me how to do the work around the shrine, and completing those duties herself...”

Yes.

“She assumed those normal days would continue like normal after Hexennacht.”

“In that case, this idiot is a powerful drug that provides an accent to those

normal days.”

She looked to Kagami, but the girl only placed a hand on her face and smiled a little.

“Jealous?”

Of what? Your skin? Are you talking about how young your skin looks...? thought Lisbeth, but Horinouchi placed a hand on Kagami’s shoulder.

“Kagami, stop that.”

“You would stop me?”

“Yes. ...German witches are scary when they hold a grudge, you know?”

Lisbeth raised her right fist and they fled 5 meters.

“Anyway,” she said with a sigh. They were incredibly lacking in tension, but as a veteran, she tried to understand that was just how the current Hexennacht was going to be.

But she did have one thing to say.

“It’s simple. Hexennacht is a clash between Devices. Even if you summon your Geo Frame, that does not change the fact that it is a fight between Devices.”

So...

“If Kagami can use her crafting ability for regeneration as a superior form of defense, you have a considerably better chance of victory.”

Do you understand?

“The Black Witch has never faced a witch with such a powerful recovery ability. Or witches using the buddy system for that matter.”

That’s true, thought Horinouchi.

“Throughout the history of Hexennacht, the battle with the Black Witch has always been 1-on-1. The battle inside the barrier has always been focused on offense and it has never been focused on a recovery spell.”

“I see. In other words, Horinouchi, you and your mother are witches

optimized for Hexennacht.”

“I don’t like what you’re implying there.”

Kagami turned to the side, held her right hand out toward Horinouchi, and opened a communications spell circle.

“Yes, is this Hunter? What? You’ve been placed in charge of us? Why do you sound so glum? I will come by to cheer you up later, so rest easy. ...Don’t come by? Now, now. Be honest with yourself. ...Anyway, I have a quick question. In your opinion, what is Horinouchi’s greatest strength? Her giant breasts? Yes, her giant breasts. I see.”

Kagami closed the spell circle and smiled Horinouchi’s way.

“My apologies, Horinouchi! A meat-eating American assures me that you are all about giant breasts and not attack power!”

Lisbeth gave her a silent nod, so Horinouchi threw Kagami to the ground.

“I think we got off topic,” said Horinouchi.

“Is it normally like this with all of you?” asked Lisbeth.

“Not at all,” said Kagami as she got up, but that elicited a glare from Horinouchi.

The idiot stood up and brushed off her uniform.

“Listen. Normally, I would ask Mary for confirmation and she would provide a course correction back on topic, Lisbeth.”

A communications spell circle appeared next to Kagami’s face, but the idiot crushed it from the top and bottom between her hands.

“Kagami, what was that?”

“Oh, nothing to worry about. You can pretend it never happened.”

That was Mary wasn’t it? thought Horinouchi, but she left it unsaid. She was afraid what the glaring Second Headmaster would ask. But another thought did occur to her.

...I'm not at all on my own like I used to be.

Hunter was there and so was Mary. She of course understood that Kagami stood at the center of it all, but she was thought of as “one of the gang” in her current environment.

It was the crazy visitor from another world that had triggered such a change in her and her environment.

And she then realized what Lisbeth had meant earlier.

...Even if Kagami acts as our healer...

“I understand, Second Headmaster. Even if the Black Witch has never fought someone who used recovery spells, that is only true *in this world*.”

Lisbeth looked toward her.

The woman was otherwise motionless.

She did not confirm that was what she had meant, but she did not deny it either. So Horinouchi had something else to ask.

“Kagami? Can you tell us? In the worlds you passed through on the way here, has the Black Witch fought any battles like that?”

“To be honest, I do not know.”

Kagami told the truth.

...Has Shouko ever fought someone with a complete grasp of recovery spells?

She did not know.

Or perhaps it was better to say she was not certain. But there was a reason she did not know. After all...

“Do you remember what I told you before, Horinouchi? ...It has finally happened.”

Horinouchi's eyebrows rose at those final words.

After an “oh” of realization, she gave the answer.

“This is the first time the Black Witch – meaning your sister – has a clear

presence, right?”

“Yes. It was originally just the destruction of the world as a phenomenon. From there, it gained a clear cause, became the work of a supernatural being, and ultimately became an act of a god or deity. And here, she is finally...finally seen as a single witch.”

After saying that, Kagami snapped her fingers. A tall figure appeared from behind some nearby bushes.

It was Mary who carried a plastic bag full of drink cans. She entered this part of the courtyard and looked up at the 2 Magino Devices overhead.

“...”

She glared at Kagami and clearly wanted to say something, but Kagami pretended not to notice.

Then Kagami spread out her snapped fingers while raising her hand toward the sky.

“Mary, do you remember what happened to your world?”

“If you are asking if there was a recovery spell squad, that would be the War Wound Healer Division of the Eastern Pure Law Team.”

“Curse Shouko. Did she think it sounded cool to give them kanji names...?”

“Aren’t you reading too much into that?” asked Horinouchi.

“No,” said Mary. “The Brigadier General was always using a powerful translation spell or mutual understanding spell, so I don’t think she noticed, but the Eastern Pure Law Team was read as the Far East Extra Lawyers and the War Wound Healer Division was read as the War Wound Healer Band.”

“Where did the pure part go!? And where did the band part come from!?”

Hunter parted the bushes as she ran over.

“So they used kanji and English in another world?”

“Horinouchi, please tell my sister that the next time you see her. That is a truly bad habit of hers, but she only ever says, ‘But everyone’s doing it!’ ”

“Um, Brigadier General...she didn’t destroy our world because she was sick of having that pointed out, did she?”

Please don’t suggest something so scary, thought Hunter.

But it was nice that she could skip the annoying “classes” by saying she had to look after Kagami and the others. And then they would take her out to eat with them and they would let her borrow a bed that didn’t smell like oil.

...I can sleep on the floor of Horinouchi’s room!

That was the best. Her family home had wooden floors with gaps between the panels, so sleeping there was the perfect way to end up eye-to-eye with a snake or scorpion from the foundation below.

Regardless, she had to ask about something Mary had said.

“You had a unit like that? So if you can have healers in a battle with a big army, could that be implemented using something as big as a Magino Device?”

“What kind of world are you imagining, Hunter?” asked Kagami.

The answer was obvious.

“If you had a war in outer space with warships the size of Magino Devices blasting each other, you could do some fleet-wide healing, couldn’t you?”

“Too bad! My sister can be very hardheaded, so whenever she has machines appear, she generally only treats them like machines.”

“You couldn’t use a magic wand to heal them like with a Device?” asked Horinouchi.

“When it was a space war, she had injuries dealt with using individual superpowers or a healing pack while machines were repaired using repair equipment. The common pattern was for it to look like the enemy was in the center of the universe, but then everything would gather there and begin to be annihilated.”

It sounded like Kagami was remembering the actual topic at hand. But in that case...

“Is this the first world where things like machines could be healed?”

“Due to the rules of witches, the magic wands were likely given that ability automatically.”

So...

“Even if there had been some development of healing spells, this should be the first time it has been at the Device level. At the very least, I have seen nothing like it in the worlds I visited in pursuit of my sister. Plus, Lisbeth, an older representative of this world, was shocked when she saw what I had done.”

“In that case, will it be effective?” asked Horinouchi.

“Yes,” said Kagami with a nod.

However, she then looked up at the 2 Devices in the sky.

“If I can do it, then she can as well assuming the conditions are right. Besides, she is the creator of this world and much crueler than me,” she said. “Now, I see a way to strengthen our defenses. But that still leaves how to defeat my sister who also has this power. We need to give that some thought.”

Chapter 1: People are a Gathering

Chapter 1

“People are a Gathering”

HORINOUCHI



You mustn't
Praise me for nothing more than this

You mustn't

Praise me for nothing more than this

“Everything just got a lot noisier over toward Tokyo Bay, didn't it?”

“Did you see all of the bulletin boards on the main road switch to ‘stop everything’?”

“Yes,” said the girl as she shook her short black hair in response to the white handbag by her left side.

The sky was illuminated by a late October setting sun.

She walked along the same riverside road as the previous night, but the road was full of cars now.

The lines of cars belonged to the evacuating people. The people had been instructed to use public transportation instead of private cars, but no one was listening.

“And yet they even increased the number of trains and buses,” commented the girl. “They’re running some exclusively for evacuation.”

“The people probably want to get their own possessions out. Not everything is going to go as planned.”

“C'mon, don't act like you're better than everyone.”

“I think you should tell that to yourself last night.”

Meanwhile, some horns began blaring down the congested road.

The girl sped up to see what that was about and she found a car stopped up ahead.

“Out of gas?”

“If so, they would only need to refuel, but it doesn't look that way. Maybe it broke down.”

As the girl wondered what they would do, two people descended from the sky. A male and female police officer wearing lightly-armored uniforms flew

down on mass-produced Normal Device cowering brooms.

They hopped down instead of landing and the woman instructed the male driver to get out onto the sidewalk. She held out her hand to the waiting cars and held up a spell circle containing her signature of jurisdiction.

“That was fast,” said the handbag.

“That’s the police for you.”

The girl saw the driver get out with whatever luggage he could hold. The male police officer shook the driver’s hand and got inside the car in his place.

“I wonder what he’s doing,” said the handbag. “Using a spell inside?”

“Maybe securing temporary ownership rights? Guys use passive magic, so I think he’s making the car his possession so his spell can apply to it.”

“What kind of spell? Is he going to lift it up and move it?”

“Lifting it up would be a physical strengthening spell, but I think using that on a car would cause it to bend.”

The girl approached as she spoke and she saw the woman open a spell circle and get the driver’s signature. Then the man got out of the car and placed a spell circle on the hood.

“— — — —”

When the man said something to the woman, she held her palm out to get the driver to stand back and then casually *lifted up* the car.

There was a spell circle above her head, but it only displayed authorization to move the car and her qualifications.

“She’s carrying it?” asked the handbag.

“I doubt she would lift it up and support it using one of her active spells. That would cause a continuous burden, making it pretty inefficient.”

“Then...”

The handbag trailed off because the woman “placed” the car over the man waiting in the road.

“Oh,” said the voice from the girl’s side.

“If he’s only ‘supporting’ it instead of ‘lifting’ it, then passive defense spells will work just fine. This way the car won’t bend.”

“That seems more like a play on words to me.”

But the man began walking with the car supported by his raised arms.

He moved nimbly. He likely had a destination in mind. While walking down the center of the 4-lane road, he even positioned it vertically when passing by a bus. That did not seem to dump the contents of the car to one side, so they too must have been “supported” by the spell placed on it.

“They probably have motor pools set up in places so they can gather up everything blocking the flow of traffic,” said the girl.

“And the people responsible will be placed on the public transportation, I suppose.”

The driver bowed and the woman passed him a spell circle telling him where to go.

Then the driver walked off in a different direction.

He left the flow of traffic and was probably on his way to a train station or something.

To clean up, the female police officer erased the spell circles from the road and bowed toward the waiting cars.

After that, she only had to fly away as a witch. Everything was back to the way it was.

The girl looked up into the sky from the sidewalk.

“Witches like that must be going on standard patrols.”

She could see groups of 2 and sometimes of 3 or 4.

“Accidents like this are less than 0.01% of the whole,” said the voice from her side. “So if they remove those, I’m guessing they only need to deal with the traffic congestion like normal. Their thinking is a bit forced, but they know people will use their private cars even if told not to, so having something like

this in place is the right decision, even if it doesn't score a perfect 100."

"Wow. That scoring really, really makes it sound like you think you're better than everyone."

"But if that's how they're doing things, I kind of want to see it for myself."

"There was an elementary school near here, so maybe they're temporarily carrying them there."

"Should we go take a look?"

The girl hesitated but ultimately shook her head.

"There's something else I want to see."

"You should have gone last night."

"I wanted to walk through the city at night then. Because I was never able to do that. But..."

The girl looked into the eastern sky.

Beyond a line of buildings, she saw the elevated buildings and roadways along the coast from the Uraga Channel to Tokyo Bay, but she could not see past there. She sighed.

"The world is in motion and connected even in the places you can't see."

She began walking. She was headed deep into the congested flow of people and cars. She turned her back on Tokyo Bay and quickened her pace.

"I wonder how much of it has been made."

Koutarou and the others were helping U.A.H.J. by constructing tents in various places.

They were currently constructing the European U.A.H. Headquarters Expansion in front of Shihouin Academy's main gate.

While they quickly worked, the Head Maid approached. She stepped into the tent where they were beginning to line up the communication equipment and command desk carried in by an outdoor transportation wagon.

“We are constructing similar tents in Yokohama, Yokosuka, and Enoshima. Enoshima will be our external headquarters. We have already geographically distributed our posts, but we will head there to assist with the advance team with construction once we finish here, so hurry it up, everyone.”

They all said they would and continued working. Then the Head Maid asked a question.

“Head Butler, will you be heading back to the mansion for today?”

“No. The mansion has already been locked up, so we will all be heading out. Most likely to Enoshima.”

Hearing that, several of the maids working on the tent nearby raised their voices.

“Ehhh!? You’re coming with us!?”

“All right! That means those of us here will be safe!”

“Head Maid, please say something to the Head Butler!”

“J-just in case I wasn’t clear enough, all of the mansion’s witches will be going, too!”

“Well, I suppose so.” The Head Maid used a spell circle to link a parabolic antenna to a relay truck. “The Black Witch’s minions do not attack with simple explosions. They use ‘destruction’, so it permeates belowground too. The mansion’s basement may be able to endure the smallest level of ‘destruction’, but from midlevel and up, a direct hit would leave us with no escape. ...But why Enoshima?”

“Because we have determined that not even the Black Witch will be able to move freely while fighting Lady Mitsuru and Lady Kagami.”

Magino Device battles naturally covered a wide area, but given the effect that terrain had on the collection of ether and the barrier placed on her, the great “fluctuations” of a city or the mountains would be inconvenient for her.

The best terrain would be the sky above a large river that matched the flow of a ley line. That allowed one to secure the ether welling up from there, but there were no large rivers matching those conditions in Japan. So...

“We think the Black Witch has an all-around strength with no fixed specialty, so she will likely choose to fight over the ocean for the lack of ‘fluctuations’ instead of finding somewhere with a specific advantage.”

“That’ll be the area of fiercest fighting,” said a witch with an eyepatch over her left eye.

She was the maid who had supplied her eye power to the 7th Fleet during Mary’s Ranker Battle.

She opened a spell circle while tying the tent canvas to the poles.

“The 7th Fleet is currently calling the 5th Fleet to Hawaii for backup. It looks like the battlefield will be the backwards ‘L’ of the coast from Tokyo Bay to Kanagawa.”

“Where is the 7th Fleet?”

“In a position where they cannot be seen from an altitude of 10 kilometers at the widest range of the battlefield.”

“They’re using the curvature of the earth as cover?”

Because the earth was round, that curvature would come between two positions with sufficient distance between them.

“Even if the Black Witch’s ‘eye’ applies to all of her minions, the final stage should be fought almost entirely on the surface. The fleet intends to attack them by using the earth as cover and traveling along the appropriate latitude.”

Everyone briefly stopped moving and nodded at what the eyepatch witch said.

When they were mopping up all of the Black Witch’s minions, would they be winning or would it be the opposite? No one had any way of knowing.

But there was something Koutarou had to say.

“Not to worry. ...Lady Mitsuru is beginning to surpass her mother. And this time, she has a partner who more than rivals her in strength.”

Let me say one thing.

“We are leaving the mansion and heading into the fiercest of the fighting, but

not just to support those of you there. It is so we can praise Lady Mitsuru when she emerges victorious.”

As soon as he said that, light sprayed through the sky.

At the same time, the maids trembled and the barriers opened around their bodies and hair began to glow.

...Those are...

They were the witches’ persistent defense and protection spells. A large quantity of ether had flowed into them and overloaded them.

He knew why.

“Did Lady Kagami dispel the Devices she had put together?”

She did so as carelessly as she created them.

A look up in the sky showed scattering light and no sign of the 2 giant forms that had been there a moment before.

She’s causing some kind of commotion again, thought Mary as she looked into the sky alongside Hunter who was doing the same.

She lightly raised a hand.

“So are we really having a strategy meeting here, Brigadier General and Horinouchi-san? Oh, and New Headmaster.”

“Yes, that is right, Mary. I am willing to give you some of my valuable time. How about that?”

She ignored her. And...

“New Headmaster, you seemed to be performing an experiment using the Brigadier General, but could you please tell us how the Black Witch’s sealing barrier works?”

“Oh?” replied Lisbeth with a smile on the corners of her lips. “You are a clever girl.”

“It is a natural question. After all...” Mary gestured into the sky. “Earlier, the

Brigadier General created a Device as a form of defense, but that consumed a great quantity of ether. That leads to a question: can external ether be sent into the sealing barrier where the battle will take place?”

This was much like a strategy she herself had once used.

After dividing Kagami Kagami from her buddy and taking just Kagami to the North Pole, she had used a certain tactic against Kagami who had a crafting ability and the ability to acquire massive amounts of ether.

“I surrounded that space with a barrier and thinned out the amount of ether within. As a result, the Brigadier General had considerable trouble repairing her Device and attacking.”

“Didn’t that end with you getting hit by some intercontinental arrows?”

Quiet, Rank 3.

At any rate, that result told her one thing.

“If this barrier is the type that cuts off ether, it is a poor match for the buddy system. After all, the Brigadier General and Miss Horinouchi both use techniques that consume a lot of ether, so they will automatically run out of fuel quite quickly. ...In that case, the Brigadier General’s Device repairs will be all the more dangerous.”

“Why don’t you consider the possibility that the Black Witch will be bound by the same conditions?”

“Because the Black Witch is much like a creator god.”

Mary knew that it had been a “god” that destroyed her world and that the “god” had only been a subordinate of what this world called the Black Witch.

This was a being higher than the gods. The normal rules did not apply with someone like that.

“Even though she was cornered during the previous Hexennacht, the Black Witch sent out her minions to turn things around. That tells us that she can be injured and ultimately destroyed and that her creation ability is likely only limited by what she can think of.”

“True... Summoning minions that could cause such great destruction to the

surface is not possible using the existing ether conservation laws.”

“While I have brought in my own unique rule while still fundamentally being bound by the rules governing this world’s characters, my sister is most likely using her own unique rule but is bound by that.”

“Why, Brigadier General?”

Mary had a question.

“She would be invincible if she did not construct that rule, so why create it?”

“The pride of an author.” Kagami smiled a little with her eyebrows still raised. “She creates and destroys this world, but she feels a pang of conscience from that act. So by establishing a rule that makes her highly unlikely to be harmed but still technically able to be harmed, she can remain almighty and yet soothe her conscience about what she does to the world.”

“Oh, you mean like how you feel guilty playing a game on god mode, but that guilt almost entirely vanishes when you can still die if you fall in a hole?”

Mary did not know what the Rank 3 was talking about, but there was one thing she understood.

“In other words, the Black Witch can be hurt, but she has excellent means of recovery and defense...”

That led to a certain conclusion.

“Just how obsessed with attack power is the Horinouchi family...?”

Horinouchi realized that Lisbeth and everyone else were looking her way.

This just took a turn for the worse, she thought, but she decided to say something regardless.

“Wh-what is that look for, everyone!?”

“Horinouchi, you said before that you have made a number of improvements over your mother, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Hunter while throwing her hands in the air. “And she tested them on me.”

“E-either way,” said Horinouchi, “defeating the Black Witch is our most important task, so greater attack power should be a good thing.”

“Looking at it another way, this means we already have attack power equal to the Black Witch’s, doesn’t it?” asked Horinouchi.

Now that you mention it, thought Horinouchi before saying more.

“It may be somewhat insane, but we can also rival the Black Witch’s defense... or rather, we have a way of repairing our Devices. And on the level of recreating them entirely.”

That was Kagami. And Kagami clearly knew it because she puffed out her chest and tried to get Horinouchi to praise her some more.

...She sure is full of energy...

Kagami had been messing with a lot of people lately and doing all sorts of unnecessary things. Horinouchi wondered what had her so worked up, but would she answer if Horinouchi asked?

But Horinouchi had another question too. It was the same one Mary had asked earlier.

“How is the sealing barrier formed?”

Lisbeth’s answer was simple.

She took a breath and then spoke.

“Currently, the seal connecting the moon and the earth does block ether.”

That meant the ether inside was limited.

Hunter knew most of this already.

American U.A.H. had not been on the scene during the previous Hexennacht, so they had not been affected much by the Black Witch’s “eraser”. That left them with some information and predictions concerning this Hexennacht’s battle.

“There are 2 problems with an ether-blocking barrier. The first is that it blocks spell communications. Of course, that can be overcome by using optical

communication spells that compress the data.”

The other problem had already been mentioned:

“How to handle the fuel efficiency.”

“Rank 3, you make it sound like your Hedgehog has cleared the fuel efficiency problem.”

Mary’s sharp, she thought before nodding.

“The truth is, both Fleur and Horinouchi’s mom had also cleared it.”

“Yes,” said Horinouchi while looking her way. “You mean great size with heavy armor or high density, don’t you?”

“I should have known!” Kagami looked to Horinouchi’s chest. “Great size indeed.”

Horinouchi attacked with a no-motion iron claw.

That was fast.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow! Your bow-holding grip is truly impressive, Horinouchi!”

What kind of compliment is that? thought Horinouchi since she might as well view it in a positive light.

“Fleur’s giant Device and the Geo Frame are both created with massive amounts of ether. But they are more than just large. They are made to hold ether inside, so they can continue fighting even when the ether density is low.”

She felt a vibration much like a flopping fish from beyond her left hand, but she ignored it. *I am actually a very good cook. Squeezing juice out of apples, for example.*

But Mary spoke after taking a quick glance beyond Horinouchi’s left hand.

“I have a question. ...If the ether density drops, won’t the Device come apart?”

Mary’s question was a good one. But...

“A 500m Device might just barely survive, but a Device or Frame larger than

3km will carry its own 'phase'."

"That's right. Instead of a 'space' through which ley lines flow, they become large enough to create their own 'geographic phase'. Then again, that requires more than just size. It also needs a geographic function and purpose, but Devices contain plenty of elements that grant that."

"Yes," agreed Horinouchi. "I understand why Fleur's Device created an 'environment' and why my mother's giant humanoid Device is known as a 'Geo Frame'. Geo is an indigenous mother earth goddess. So if we can summon the Geo Frame, the Device will maintain its form as a 'phase' even within the ether-blocking barrier and it will continue to function based on the ether contained within it. ...Of course, that will then become the upper limit of our fuel."

"When you think about it, becoming your own 'phase' is really the work of a god."

"Your Hedgehog is the same, though."

That was because the heavy armor of Hunter's Device increased the density of the ether. So depending on the circumstances, it might create its own "phase" separate to its apparent size.

...It's probably on the border of being able to do that or not.

Becoming a "phase" would mean being dragged around by that "phase". And in the Hedgehog's case...

"A 'phase' made from heavy armor would probably be similar to that of the earth's crust or of boulders. So once you reached that level, you would probably have difficulty moving very quickly."

"That's right. And that's why I didn't keep the heavy armor airtight during the Ranker Battles. The swing-by method would require a hell of a lot of power if I was being dragged around by my own 'phase' and that would slow me down. ... So after winning the Ranker Battles, I was planning to seal it all up in preparation for Hexennacht. ...Because if the Hexennacht barrier blocks ether, I wouldn't be able to use my satellite swing-by method anyway. I would have needed to strengthen the interior."

"Was that how it worked?" Mary sighed lightly and Horinouchi understood

why she felt disappointed. “My Ira was not designed to function in a zero-ether environment.”

“In that case, U.A.H. would have provided advice and assistance, so worry not.”

Lisbeth was right. And Horinouchi felt Mary had done more than enough.

“Your annihilation spell would work against the Black Witch, you know?”

“It didn’t work against the former Rank 1’s environment spell.”

Horinouchi needed to correct her.

“It did not work ‘against’ it. During the final battle, Kagami and I adjusted to match the environment in order to avoid being hit. ...It’s all in how you think about it. And we were only able to make that decision after seeing your earlier battle.”

“Miss Horinouchi...”

It still was not clear why Mary called her “miss”, but the girl lowered her head regardless.

“Thank you for your kind words.”

“Did you hear that, everyone!? Lady Mitsuru showed concern for a friend and received respect in exchange! Eavesdropping was worth it after all! You have to accept that now!”

“Head Butler, while I must say ‘well done, milady’, what you are doing is the worst.”

“Yes, thank you for the valuable scene, Head Butler. But you are the worst.”

“That’s right. This deserves a major ‘well done’-ing, but the Head Butler is the worst.”

“Ahh, I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you! This is all thanks to me, so I’ll just ignore all of that! ...Well done, milady!!”

Anyway, thought Horinouchi.

...Our strategy for Hexennacht is becoming clear.

“Once the battle begins, we need to use Kagami’s ability to prevent any damage and then we need to summon the Geo Frame if the battle is going to last very long.”

But a question arose.

“During the previous Hexennacht, the Black Witch called in her minions for reinforcements. If all ether was blocked, how did she do that, Kagami?”

She removed the iron claw and asked her question, so Kagami shook her head and immediately answered.

“Well, that would be because she did not use anything like a spell, Horinouchi. Let us discuss this while we head out for some food. This involves some private information, after all. Mary, Hunter, you come as well. What about you, Lisbeth?”

They looked over to find Lisbeth glaring at Kagami and waving her right hand. She then wrinkled her brow.

“I have work to do!”

It looks like she really, really wants to come with us.

Chapter 2: Think About It

Chapter 2

“Think About It”



Instead of wondering how this happened
You think “not again” because you know exactly how this happened

Instead of wondering how this happened

You think “not again” because you know exactly how this happened

“Oh, I think I’ll go buy a drink!”

Even the traffic jam filling the roads had ended. The girl quickened her pace as the majority of the traffic became witches who were no longer hiding who they were and U.A.H. vehicles.

She had come to the entrance of a train station.

The station building doubled as a shopping center and it bore the words Sagami Railway Main Line – Mitsukyo Station.

Leaving through the north ticket gate led to an elevated terrace in and out of the station.

The area around the station was hilly and the green of trees was visible from the terrace.

“Over there, by that hill.”

“Is that where the drinks are?”

“My home. You can’t see it from here, though.”

The girl pointed toward a hill to the northwest. The bag by her side sighed.

“That’s pretty far. And we couldn’t use the train anyway.”

“Thanks for sticking with me.”

She walked across the terrace and out the north entrance. There was a shopping district there, and...

“Oh, the open café really is here.”

“That seems really out of place. Do I have your extreme authority to thank for this?”

“You should thank me for not letting it disappear on its own.”

The girl walked over to the open counter bearing the logo of a chain café. There were already 2 or 3 people there. After walking below the roof, she

realized there were a few witches inside and they were gathering information with spell circles.

The girl casually looked over the shoulder of the person ordering ahead of her, so the voice at her side spoke.

“Is this your first time somewhere like this?”

“I sometimes went to the burger place inside the station. I always got the fish burger.”

“I look forward to seeing how badly you screw up ordering.”

“Prepare to be disappointed,” said the girl as her turn arrived and she stepped forward.

The clerk was a tall woman who opened a standardized spell circle prepared by the restaurant.

“What would you like?”

“Oh, I’ll have a medium-sized icing brulee with extra chocolate chips, chocolate sauce, and double cream. To go.”

“Isn’t there a more specialized way of saying that?”

Hearing the voice, the clerk smiled and the girl tapped her side.

The clerk jotted down the order, and...

“Your servant?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“I see. ...Oh, is the bitter caramel sauce okay?”

“Eh? Um...”

“What’s the difference?” asked the voice.

“With this combination, it has a powerfully melty texture with a thick and heavy sweetness, so the bitter caramel can make it all fairly heavy. Using the sweet caramel makes a clear difference and mixing it in improves the flavor, but that’s just the average opinion. I think some people prefer it heavy.”

“Then I’ll have it heavy.”

“Okay, then wait just a moment. ...Oh, and what herb? Mint?”

“Oh, yes, I’ll go with that.”

“Thank you,” said the clerk as she passed the written order to the cook further behind the counter.

She opened a takeout bag and placed some paper napkins inside.

“Do you have a post for the day after tomorrow? You know, for Hexennacht.”

“Ohh...” The girl hesitated a moment and then smiled with her eyebrows lowered. “Well, I’ll be taking part.”

“I see. ...Then if you have a seal, let me see it. If you’re in charge of this region, this will be on the house.”

“Oh, no, I’m not in charge of this region. I’ll be more...out to sea I think. I only came here to see my family home.”

“Oh, then you do that. It’s important, isn’t it?”

The girl blushed a little at that and lowered her head.

“Thank you very much.”

“No, no. ...When most witches are assigned to a region...well, Japan is Shinto, so they have a lot to do with the local shrine and such. It apparently makes a better ‘match’ than you might think, but I hear they will try to fit in by continuing with their lives like normal and following the local god.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Well, it’s more of a jinx based on the idea that it would be nice for things to continue like that. It apparently spread on the internet and I think everyone does it nowadays. Since you don’t seem to worry about that, does that mean you’re from the academy?”

“Eh? Umm, something like that.”

“No, you aren’t. Don’t just agree to-...”

The girl snapped her hand up from below to silence the contents of her bag. The clerk had not heard that exchange, so she smiled calmly to fill the gap.

“The Rank 1s at the academy are causing a commotion again, aren’t they? The coast was in a panic with the combat-form Magino Devices that were summoned without warning. Did you know that?”

“Oh, um, I knew something happened, but I didn’t know that’s what it was...”

“I see,” said the clerk as she turned back toward a voice from the kitchen.

When she turned back around, she held a clear plastic cup.

“Here you go. ...Should I put the straw in?”

The girl answered in the affirmative, so the clerk did so and then put the cup in a plastic bag. The girl listened to the woman as she handed her the bag.

“Those Rankers have been eating out a lot recently. The academy has been busy lately and U.A.H. has been more active here in the Kanagawa region, so it’s probably quieter if they head out somewhere.”

“So they’re on their way to Shinagawa? ...Well, middle management jobs aren’t easy, Lisbeth Lueger.”

The sea breeze blew in the afternoon sky and a slab of steel floated in the vast, dark blue ocean below.

It was a giant aircraft carrier. Currently, both sides had opened, the anchoring floats were out, and the waterline was positioned high as several moving figures and voices were found on the deck.

The ship faced north, a fellow ship was positioned far to port, and 5 giant spell circles were opened in the sea between the 2 ships.

“Unlock!”

In response to the loudspeaker spell from the ship, the spell circles on the ocean surface began to rotate like screws.

Fog appeared in that area of sea, a 2nd and 3rd spell circle stacked atop the existing ones, and they all slowed or sped up their rotation while repeatedly moving down and up.

Something grew from the center of the spell circles as they did so.

It was a giant sword made of light which was even larger than the aircraft carrier.

The sword quickly grew black.

“Lisbeth Lueger. You originally created these with only the ether of the mountains. And you designed them for that purpose, didn’t you?”

A blonde woman in a jumpsuit sat on the edge of the deck while smoking a cigarette.

The woman looked to the sea. She was a witch with the insignia of a rear admiral and a badge of a musical note and shot glass on her shoulders.

She quietly clicked her tongue toward the communication spell circle opened at the end of her cigarette.

“We specialize in the ‘phases’ of the sea, the sky, the wind, and the night. ... This is a bad match. We still have 2 more to go and it’s taking an awful long time.”

“Can your aircraft carrier not fly to the mountains of Europe?”

“If you told me to, I’d get it flying. Are you sure you want to see more of the chaos that I, Song Café, can cause?”

And just as the woman, Song Café, said that...

“Ah, Song Café! I’m boooored! Is that Lisbeth!? Having a class reunion?”

“...Now that is not someone I wanted catching wind of this.”

“Who is it?” asked Lisbeth. “No, if it’s someone there, it would have to be-...”

Before Lisbeth could speak the name, Song Café’s communication spell circle shook. A moment later, someone wearing a vice admiral’s jacket ran up from behind.

She wore sunglasses and her long black hair fluttered in the wind as she opened her own communication spell circle.

“Lisbeth! ...What’s this? What do you think you’re doing with our cute Hunter!? Give her back!”

While intercepting the communications at the bust stop in front of Shihouin Academy, Hunter held a hand to her head.

While waiting at the bust stop next to her, Mary moved out of the way of Kagami who was trying to capture Horinouchi with a video spell.

“What is it, Rank 3? You’ve had your ear to that communication spell circle for a while now.”

“...I’ve only been gone for a day, but it’s already sounding like a drama is starting.”

“I see,” said Mary, but there was nothing Hunter could do about the drama developing out at sea.

“Listen!” shouted A-un Silver Coin, commander of the 7th Fleet, on the transmission. “If Hunter doesn’t get to eat meat every day, her barbecue flavor will turn to salsa!”

Hunter had no idea what that meant.

...Am I really that bad?

But that incoherence was just how A-un Silver Coin worked. As that Urban Name suggested, she used strategies based on fortunetelling using medallions, but she oftentimes took her foresight too far and had trouble holding a normal conversation. Song Café was an old friend of hers and had come along as her aide to translate for her and help her along, but...

“Hunter is our girl, so if you don’t feed her enough meat and get her injured, I’ll destroy you!”

Don’t just jump to the conclusion, thought Hunter, but she could tell she was cared for.

Then Lisbeth responded. She answered the outrageous behavior in a calm voice.

“...I will crush both of you.”

...Please spare me this!

Should Hunter cut into the transmission and say, “Hi, hi. I’m on my way to a

family restaurant to eat some meat, so don't worry! Okay!?" She was fairly certain they would demand that the child stay quiet, but was that only her timidity talking?

Regardless, that was when Song Café cut in.

"Hey, Lisbeth." After a short pause, she spoke an admonishment. "Right now, you're asking us to repair your Magino Devices. I know one of our people is being a little full of herself, but try to keep yourself under control."

Yes, yes, yes, thought Hunter. Cool. Stay cool. When cooking meat, you can't just constantly flip it over.

...Staying calm is important!

That must have gotten through to Lisbeth because she cleared her throat and spoke in the transmission.

"Yes, I understand that, American U.A.H."

She understands that...? thought Hunter, but did that make her more of a normal person than she thought?

Then Lisbeth continued with her words of understanding.

"I understand that, but this is a different matter."

"...What is it, Rank 3?" asked Mary.

You don't have to say anything. I know there's something wrong with this. Have you ever even heard the word "understanding" before?

Hunter just hoped a great witch war would not break out between Tokyo Bay and the ocean off of Kanagawa while her group was visiting Shinagawa to eat meat and parfaits. But...

"Oh, here it is, everyone."

The bus had arrived. Hunter sealed the communication spell. She could not allow anyone in the bus to overhear those voices.

But as she erased the spell circle...

...Will this be okay?

A-un Silver Coin's voice reached her ears.

"Fine then! Let's fight it out just like last time! ...Just like the fight to be representative 10 years ago!"

Ah, thought Hunter as she tried to stop the spell circle's erasure, but it was no use.

...The European U.A.H. Representative and those 2 knew each other?

Lisbeth could tell it was time for a change of pace.

...I've had far too much work and far too many things to think about for work.

She wanted to take a break, but that would never work inside the academy. When she could see the Devices surrounding her in the sky, she felt like she had to work.

Am I being infected by the Japanese spirit? she wondered, but Germans were hard workers during the work hours. And it was still before 5.

With that logic, she felt like she had to work.

Americans were the best when it came to forcing themselves to take breaks at times like this. After all, they were loud and incomprehensible.

But one of them was saying something nostalgic.

"You defeated us, so why did you lose to the 2 above you!?"

That was a simple question.

"Because I lacked attack power."

"Lisbeth, you destroyed my 'counter' with a single attack."

"Let me make one thing very clear," said Lisbeth. "I lost to Mitsuyo because I did such a bad job cleaning the bathtub."

Ever since, she had made sure not to leave any grime around the edges. That was her promise to a lost friend.

"...Thanks for the confusing answer," said Song Café.

You're welcome, she thought but did not say. Still, this did remind her of old

times.

“Come to think of it, you 2 were the first to use the buddy system in the representative battles, even if it wasn’t called that at the time.”

“I did the fighting and A-un Silver Coin did the strategizing. With the Hexennacht barrier in mind, we used optical communications to exchange instructions, but you saw through that, didn’t you?”

“We fought in the sky above the ocean and the battlefield’s range was limited. You had sent the 7th Fleet below to ‘observe’, but my ‘eye’ can see laser light.”

“I managed to communicate my prediction, but before I could tell her the details, the battle began, we lost, we unfortunately had to retreat, and we arrived too late!”

That was right.

When America’s representatives lost that battle, they had given up on holding a position during Hexennacht. They had been growing independent from Europe at the time, but they had lost to Lisbeth, who was effectively the European representative. With that and Cerisier, who was also European, at Rank 2, America had lost any room to intervene.

That had kept their 7th Fleet from moving, but...

“But 3 of my medallions pointed to good fortune *here*! So I might have received a lot of mockery, but the next thing I knew, I was the commander, I found myself here, and I was telling Hunter to enjoy her connections even after the Ranker Battles were over! Agh, I just wish I could have predicted back then exactly what was going to happen.”

“I suppose prophecy and foresight abilities do grow more inaccurate over longer periods of time.”

A-un Silver Coin responded to Lisbeth’s comment with a sigh.

“My ‘reading’ predicted victory. ...And so I let my guard down.”

Lisbeth started to say “I see”, but held her tongue.

Come to think of it, A-un Silver Coin did indeed use foresight fortunetelling. So

back then and now...

...Wait.

Calm down, she told herself before asking a question.

“Are you talking about the representative battle against me?”

Lisbeth felt like her question chilled the air. A-un Silver Coin likely knew what her question meant. Finally, the woman sighed with a slight smile.

“This is top secret,” she said. “My ‘reading’ back then was pretty long-term, but it said the final representative should have defeated the Black Witch.”

...If Mitsuyo was supposed to win, why did she lose?

Lisbeth asked a few “why” questions and followed the mental path that the answers laid out for her.

Why had A-un Silver Coin’s “reading” said Mitsuyo would win?

Why had that “reading” been wrong?

And if such “readings” were possible, why...

“...Did you ‘read’ that you could not win the representative battle against me?”

“No? Destiny...or would you call it a thread? A lot of it changes as you draw that thread in. I can ‘read’ things, but it takes time, right? I look down at that thread and read it, but some people will draw the thread in partway through and some will intertwine it with another thread.”

Fortunetelling witches often said there was more than one destiny.

“In my case, I simultaneously read a series of about 30 threads located around the target, but I lost that time. ...Thanks to some sudden interference.”

“...? No one interfered in our battle.”

“There were the 2 above you, remember?”

“Wait,” said Lisbeth. “Neither Mitsuyo nor Cerisier interfered in our battle. That was how our relationship worked.”

“And that’s the point,” said Song Café. “You had that relationship with them. If it was just your destiny and your thoughts, that would be one thing. But that powerful relationship caused you to think of them in battle, allowed you to entrust your destiny to them, and even led you to wonder *what they would do* in certain circumstances.”

“You mean...?”

“The report from Shihouin Academy says we and this world are the product of someone’s imagination. But...*we can use our own imagination to compare ourselves to someone else*. I think that means we aren’t the product of someone else. No, um, we aren’t *just* the product of someone else. So...”

So...

“At the time, Song Café and I knew each other well enough to know what the other would be thinking even with the ether blocked, but it turned out you were the same. ...I thought we could win, but we were defeated by the breadth of the solid relationship you had formed. We lost because we didn’t realize you had that breadth. But that doesn’t mean that ‘you won’.”

Hearing that helped her understand a lot about those 10-year-old events.

Lisbeth had held some doubts about some of it.

...Like that I was 3rd best and could never move any higher than that.

She still felt she had lost to Cerisier and Mitsuyo because of her insufficient attack power. But...

“It is true that when I fought those two back then...I felt I could entrust everything to them even if I lost.”

“I think the other two were a little different. Saying this might be a little mean, though.” A-un Silver Coin’s calm tone belied what she was saying. “Those two probably were willing to entrust everything with you, but I think they had also resolved themselves to carry everyone else’s thoughts and relationships.”

“Probably so.”

Lisbeth could always just say they had had the greater resolve, but Mitsuyo and Cerisier had had children.

That gave them something to protect. Having that gave them the resolve to carry everyone's thoughts and relationships, and it also gave them someone to entrust everything to if they lost.

Lisbeth had only had half of that. Yes, she thought.

...Maybe I should have gotten married.

No, I doubt it's that simple.

Oh, no. I've never once felt I should do that, so am I only thinking it now because I'm feeling timid with Hexennacht approaching?

But understanding this told her just why Cerisier had made a school.

The witches of the school had been someone Cerisier could entrust everything to.

But Cerisier's desire to protect them had been stronger and she had felt regret.

...Honestly, what is all this?

Had Lisbeth understood all this when she had pressed Cerisier about it?

And now the act of taking over the headmaster position felt like supplementing something that was never there.

I can't believe this.

Cerisier's spell had been based on flowers.

Flower spells were standard for fortunetelling.

Had she perhaps "read" this future?

If so, it made sense that Lisbeth had been no match for her.

Mitsuyo had been the strongest, Cerisier had been second, and Lisbeth had been last. And thankfully...

"Was I guided to victory over you two by my relationship with and thoughts about those two?"

"Maybe so. Predicting a single person and reading their relationships with 30 other people is simple enough, but including the relationships and thoughts

built up inside that one person is much more difficult. ...I mean, they don't actually exist and you don't know when they'll show up."

I see, Lisbeth said in her heart.

Over the past 10 years, there had been a few questions and signs that she would gradually forget and then suddenly remember as something like a regretful worry. She had never expected to find the answer here.

Without thinking, she sighed and spoke.

"You have my thanks."

"Oh?"

Song Café smiled bitterly as she crouched on the deck and viewed the half-formed European U.A.H. Magino Devices.

...Now that's some high-level thanks.

The European U.A.H. Representative was bowing to her and A-un Silver Coin who were essentially America's representatives. Then again, this was a private issue. It was nothing worth informing the mainland about.

But they could tell some ill feelings were being cleared away inside them.

"And you have our thanks." Song Café sighed. "I still sometimes wonder what would have happened 10 years ago if American hadn't distanced itself from Hexennacht."

"We will make sure there is no next time. Count on it."

That German spirit could be scary.

"Yeah, but what are you going to do?" asked Song Café. "You're changing the makeup of the barrier for the buddy system, right?"

"The old barrier still exists, so we only have to alter it. The authority to change it is naturally held by U.A.H. and U.A.H.J., but there is one change that should be made as soon as possible."

"What is it that's worth breaking tradition over?"

“We must stop blocking the ether.”

Huh? thought Song Café before A-un Silver Coin’s voice joined the conversation.

“Wait! Do you know what will happen if you do that!? It won’t be able to contain the Black Witch or our witches, so the kaboom will get through!”

Not even Song Café knew what exactly that meant.

But her own knowledge did reveal a risk in Lisbeth’s idea.

“The barrier is supposed to prevent the Black Witch and our witches’ spells from getting out, so won’t this render it useless? Even if the restrictions still apply to the Black Witch herself and the Devices, spells are almost entirely composed of highly-active ether.”

“There might be a benefit that outweighs that risk.”

“That isn’t something I expected to hear from a German. So tell us what it is.”

“When the Black Witch felt cornered during the last Hexennacht, she called in ‘reinforcements’, right?”

“Yes,” agreed Song Café while A-Un Silver Coin sent a blank message to express her understanding.

Lisbeth then said more.

“That summoning probably wasn’t a spell. So we have concluded that the blocking does no good.”

“Huh?”

Lisbeth heard both the Americans express their confusion in unison.

...Well, I can’t really blame them.

So she would first let them have their say. She fell silent for that purpose and they seemed to understand what her breath meant. A-un Silver Coin spoke first, as if trying to reject the idea.

“You’re saying she instantly gave form to so much ether and called down that

great army, but she didn't use a summoning spell?"

"That's right."

"Then what? What? What was that? Did they already exist? Or did the Black Witch have a summoning spell on the 'outside' that was set up to activate once she was in danger?"

"It was not a spell. ...Weren't you listening?"

"Then," cut in Song Café.

She selected a portion of what A-un Silver Coin had said.

"They already existed?"

"That isn't possible!" insisted A-un Silver Coin. "If they did, we would have been able to 'see' them! There would have been some kind of reaction. I mean, once they were summoned, our detection devices went haywire!"

"Then they weren't summoned, A-un Silver Coin," corrected Song Café. "Were they simply created? Not with a spell, but with some power that ignored the ether and ley lines?"

"Yes," confirmed Lisbeth.

"That's..."

A-un Silver Coin was likely trying to say "that's impossible", but she knew by now that it was not impossible.

"Earlier, Kagami Kagami, one of the Rank 1s, said something interesting. While instantly creating 2 Magino Devices, she said that her power used ether when processing ether."

What did that mean?

"Kagami's crafting ability looks like a spell that consumes ether, but she is simply securing the energy needed for the ether processing. The system itself is no more than her own power."

"You mean...?"

"Yes." Lisbeth sent out her own speculation that had since been confirmed. "That crafting ability is not a spell at its core. That power is at a higher or deeper

level than ether or ley lines. ...Perhaps you could call it the hand of god.”

She now understood what had happened during the previous Hexennacht.

“The Black Witch felt cornered by Mitsuyo. She had always prepared a massive stock of spells, fought in the ether-blocking barrier, and won under the same conditions as her opponent. But she found herself helpless against Mitsuyo’s Geo Frame, so she broke her own rules.”

She used her power.

“The Black Witch used the same power she used to create this world. Fearing she might lose, she panicked. She probably still tried to follow her rules as best she could, but she still created her minions *outside the barrier*. She did not intervene with the battle within the barrier, but she created those destructive reinforcements in the outside world.”

The ether-blocking barrier meant nothing when she used a power that surpassed both ether and the ley lines.

She had only been following their rules voluntarily, so she could always destroy or simply ignore them.

...*Honestly*...

Up until that point, humanity had been underestimating the Black Witch.

She had never used her power in any serious way. She had only been placing herself in a cage she could destroy or ignore at any time and seeing how her creation was doing every 10 years.

It made Lisbeth wonder just how much she looked down on them, but there was a troublesome aspect to this.

When someone rose to her level so she could no longer look down on them, she would destroy them.

“This time, Mitsuru wields the power that was inherited from Mitsuyo and further improved upon. And she is joined by Kagami who claims to be the Black Witch’s older sister and can use that crafting ability. ...The Black Witch could very well choose to destroy this entire world.”

“And that’s why we needn’t bother shackling ourselves with the ether blocking?”

“That’s right,” replied Lisbeth with a nod. “To let Kagami use her crafting ability to its fullest, we should remove the ether blocking and allow her to resupply with ether at any time.”

“But, but, but? What about the Suzaku-user’s attacks? Without the barrier’s defenses, a stray shot could hit the mainland.”

Lisbeth held a hand to her head.

...Yes, that.

Song Café could tell she had hit on a critical point. Lisbeth had probably been worrying about that and trying to not to think about it.

But after a while, Lisbeth resumed speaking.

“We will make sure she does not hit the mainland.”

“Who will and how?”

“She will not hit the mainland, so no one has to do anything.”

“Now you’re making less sense than me!”

Apparently A-un Silver Coin was aware how little sense she made. But Song Café had a feeling pointing that out was more trouble than it was worth.

...Removing all the stops for a head-on battle with the Black Witch, hm?

What would happen if they were wielding even more power than last time? No, the Black Witch would have learned her lesson last time, so she would have prepared for this.

They could not let their guard down. But something still bothered her.

“Is the Black Witch’s crafting ability superior to Kagami’s?”

“Conditionally, yes. ...But there is one concerning external factor.”

“External?”

Song Café wondered if the power came in different forms or directionalities,

but Lisbeth's answer was different.

"There is something known as the Book of Creation."

"? ...That is a focusing tool for the technique, correct? I saw the report."

"I thought so too, but what Kagami said suggests it is on another level entirely. Most likely," she explained, "it is an Intelligent Artifact and it was the item used to create this world with ease. The Black Witch possesses it and it allows her to create anything she wants while ignoring the ether consumption that Kagami requires. ...That is what defeated us during the last Hexennacht."

...Wait.

If Hunter was here, she would have said something funny here, thought Song Café.

Just like A-un Silver Coin, Song Café's name was widely known among the American witches and the European witches, but...

...We pale in comparison to this ridiculous power.

"We did receive a report from U.A.H.J. We read about the supposed resident of another world who was joining the Ranker Battles."

The girl claimed to be the Black Witch's older sister and she claimed this world was no more than a creation of her sister and her. And the Book of Creation had indeed been mentioned there.

But it had been unclear if that was true or not. And even if it was, what did that matter?

The American mainland had taken a more realistic stance.

"If it is true but does not provide a way of immediately eliminating the Black Witch, then it is no more than a profile."

That was exactly right.

Even if the details about the Black Witch's family and past were true, it was meaningless if that did not let them erase the threat of the moon hanging in the sky.

So her presence had not been *all that* meaningful.

A visitor from another world would not immediately rid them of the Black Witch.

Hexennacht was still the only way of defeating the Black Witch.

In that case, it was all up to Kagami's ability.

She just had to be skilled.

If a meaningless person got involved by merely making herself look important, it would cause great damage.

Thus, they had left this in U.A.H.J.'s hands, but their ace, Hunter, had been defeated and the visitor had risen to Rank 1. At that point, Song Café had looked at it thusly:

...From here, we just have to see how useful she is when compared to the Black Witch.

What mattered was that she did not betray them and take the Black Witch's side. From that perspective, Song Café could see why Shihouin Academy had introduced the buddy system.

It had looked like the rest came down to ability, but...

"...The Book of Creation, huh?"

"Yes," replied Lisbeth over the transmission. "We may have finally begun planning a full countermeasure against the Black Witch instead of merely throwing brute strength her way."

"And? And? What do we know about this Book of Creation? Anything at all?"

"Kagami's group is probably discussing that now. ...Want to visit a Shinagawa family restaurant?"

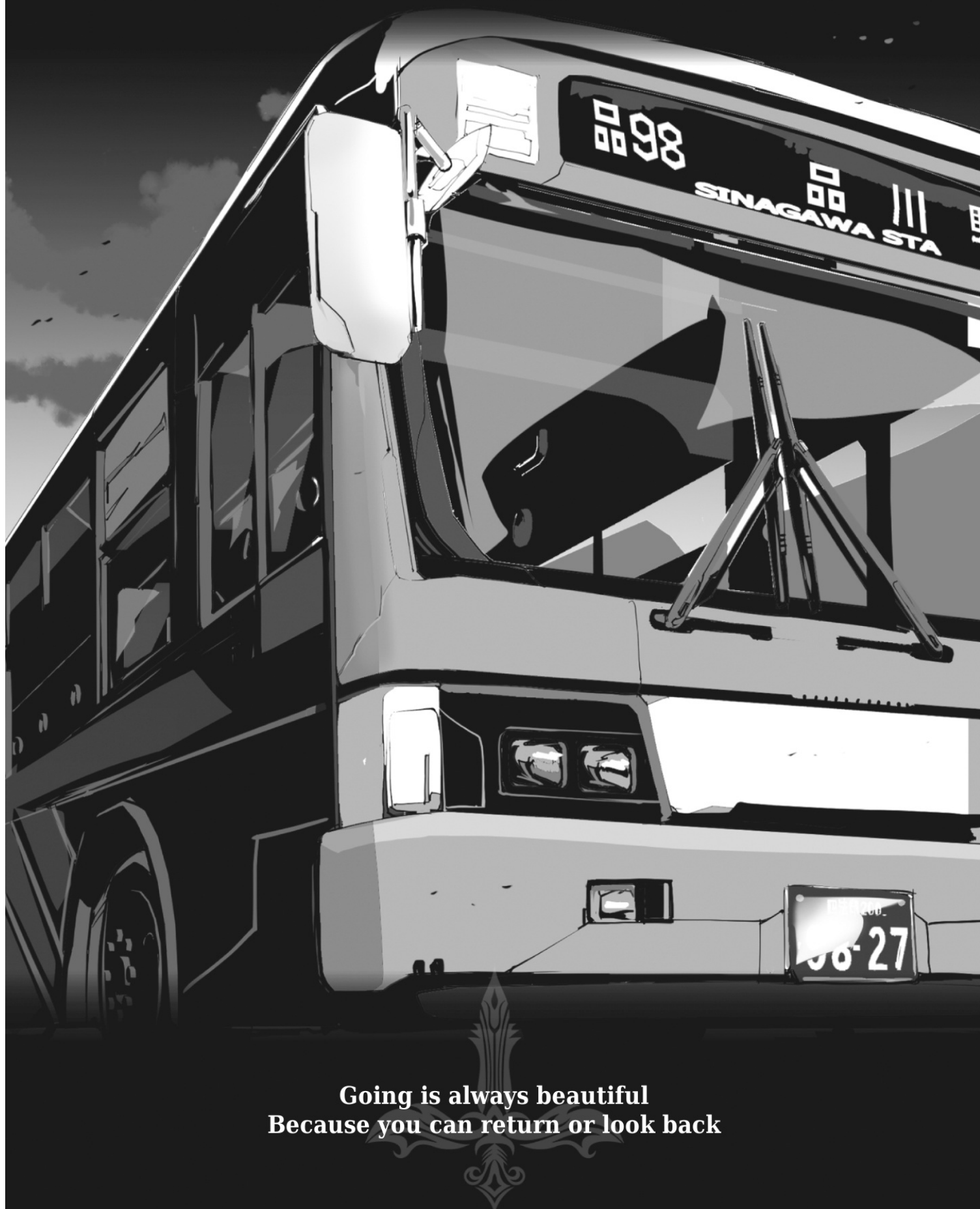
What would happen if they did? The answer was obvious.

"It's still the afternoon, but Hunter is definitely eating meat."

Chapter 3: It Flows

Chapter 3

“It Flows”



Going is always beautiful
Because you can return or look back

Going is always beautiful

Because you can return or look back

The girl bent forward a little as the light of the nearly setting sun washed over her.

Her back rose and fell as she tried to catch her breath.

She was on a road. However, this road sloped up a hill that was nearly a small mountain. It was a fairly wide, one-lane road. A slope up and a slope down existed on the left and right of the road, but those slopes were covered in dried leaves and thick with trees.

The girl coughed once and then twice below the branches.

“Wow.”

The breath that escaped her throat sounded surprised.

“I’m way healthier than I used to be.”

“*This* is better!?”

“Now, now, now,” said the girl as she pulled a largish cup from the plastic bag she held. She shook it a few times while sweating in the autumn air and then she stuck the straw in and took a sip.

Still leaning forward, she swallowed a couple of times.

“Okay, it’s perfectly melted and perfect to drink!”

She straightened up and looked down the slope.

She saw something beyond the trees.

An iron fence. It was painted black, it had spikes on top to keep off birds, and it was at least 2m tall. It also had cables wrapped around it in places for security.

Inside it was a landscaped line of trees and a lake.

She could not see any further than that, but the girl still glanced in that direction.

“Let’s get going.”

“You aren’t going to take a look? You aren’t going to say hi?”

“I could see the whole thing from the bend up above. You can’t see any of it when the angle’s wrong, though.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I wanted to see something else.”

“You aren’t here to see the mansion?”

“No,” answered the girl with a bitter smile as she hurried down the road.

By the time she passed a group of a few cars, she had caught her breath. The autumn evening had fully arrived by then, so her pace picked up and she had worked out a way to walk and drink through the straw at the same time.

“Yeah, I always wanted to do this.”

“Were you in a restrictive environment?”

“No. I just never decided to do it myself.”

“I’m glad I could accompany you in this personal growth.”

“C’mon, that’s just creepy. This was only a whim. ...My sister had no trouble doing this kind of thing, so maybe I just wanted to caution her.”

“Oh, this is getting more complicated, so I’ll pass. I’m here to listen to the stories you come up with, so I’ll hear you out if it’s part of that.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said the girl as the slope reached the city and the forest on either side of the road ended.

Her vision opened up.

She could look down on the city all the way to the station. The sun was shining on her back from this position. Its light washed over the city, so the girl’s gaze followed that and then moved beyond it.

“Oh, are those the 1000 Devices that came to Tokyo Bay?”

“They should just barely be visible from here. And I believe there are 1500 of them now.”

“Then that must be them. Want to go get a better look?”

The bag by the girl’s side responded with a sigh.

“You won’t last.”

“We should be able to see them from Shinagawa.”

“Shinagawa? Why?”

“When I used to meet up with my sister afterschool, we would take a break at a family restaurant on the river there.”

“Your family was wealthy, wasn’t it? Were you studying lower class culture?”

The girl glared at and slapped the bag from below.

“I apologize,” it said.

“Good.”

With the light shining on her back, the girl walked toward the station. And...

“Look, my school is that way and my sister would get off one station ahead and come meet me because ‘it is on the way’. ...And when I wasn’t feeling well, we would stop at that family restaurant.”

“And when you were feeling well?”

“There was a place on the river bank that was part of the park...over there. My sister would go buy something for me.”

As the girl explained, they reached the slope leading to the station.

“Wow, this takes me back. This is the road, this is the road. It never seemed like a slope on the way there, but it’s a decent way down when you see it from the top like this. I need to remember that.”

“Are you going to say this in Shinagawa too?”

“If the family restaurant is still there.” The girl smiled a little. “We celebrated my sister’s birthday there once.”

“Lower class style?”

“Again, Japan doesn’t have that harsh a class divide... Well, we do, but it’s pretty flexible. We went out for her birthday, but the roads were congested and

we needed to take a break somewhere, so she suggested we celebrate it there.”

“And?”

“They had a seasonal menu, so it was full of things we’re always seeing but never get served at home, right? We had fun ordering all sorts of things and, since it was my sister’s birthday, mom and dad decided to let us do it. Long story short, it was amazing.”

“Having fun is the best thing to do at times like that.”

“It really is.” The girl gave another small smile. “How many years ago was that now?”

“Was it before you met me?”

“...You don’t actually have to figure it out, okay?”

The girl added “and knowing you, you probably would” as she sped up her pace.

The station came into view. After leaving the road and choosing the stairs leading up to the terrace, a train arrived at the station from the east.

“Oh, the one we want will arrive to meet that one!”

The girl watched the flow of people around her and she predicted the timing of the train as she climbed to the terrace. She put the empty cup and its bag in a terrace trash can and saw a train to the west.

She would make it in time. The sun had descended quite a bit. But...

“Let’s go to Shinagawa. ...That’ll be our last stop.”

Horinouchi never knew quite what to do with herself when traveling by bus.

Almost all the seats were filled with people from the academy and they kept glancing her way.

I must have become famous at some point, she thought, but she had probably been that way in the first place. Previously, she had traveled in a private Horinouchi family car or “flown” there using a transportation spell. But...

...In Kagami's original world, everyone must use this sort of transportation method.

She had heard it was a world without the concept of ether, but it was also possible that Kagami herself did not have the ability to use it and thus she or her entire world had simply not “noticed” the ether.

But how would witches like them live without that kind of power?

She had trouble imagining it, but as far as transportation was concerned, they would be unable to fly. Unless they had personal flight devices, they would have to walk, ride a bicycle, drive a car, or use public transportation such as trains.

Hunter seemed like a compromise since she would ride on fighters, but maybe that was different.

At any rate, Kagami had recently started suggesting they hold meetings and waste time at a Shinagawa family restaurant, but Horinouchi sensed that she had some kind of reason for that.

Shihouin Academy and the Horinouchi family were of course busy preparing for battle and Yokohama, Sakuragicho, Kawasaki, and further south were full of evacuating people as well as the witches and U.A.H. members moving in and out, so things were more oppressive than usual.

Yokosuka in particular never seemed to sleep even when viewed from the living room lounge at night. Atsugi and the 7th Fleet out at sea continued to exchange fighters monitoring the moon and they were likely dropping off people who rode them like Hunter when they passed above Yokosuka.

In that case, visiting somewhere different from normal and doing things in a different way than normal was a decent choice.

To be honest, the view of Shihouin Academy and the 1000+ Magino Devices floating above Tokyo Bay seen out the Shinagawa family restaurant's large window seemed like something from a different country entirely.

She had once commented on that view at night.

“That is a scene that shouldn't exist.”

“It will soon be that way, Horinouchi.”

You make it sound like it will just happen on its own, she thought, but it seemed like her feelings had been validated since Kagami saw it the same way.

Ever since then, they would visit Shinagawa once a day and it had become very important to her, even the dull trip there and back. When she had gotten permission from Lisbeth on the 3rd day, she had expected to receive a warning, but the woman had been much more positive:

“That’s a great idea! Yes. Spend some time away from here. That would be for the best. You definitely don’t want to have everyone gather together at night and fight over the TV channel! Got that!?”

Why the emphasis on that? wondered Horinouchi, but that was apparently important.

They had started to run out of conversation topics, but then...

“...You said you had a lot to tell us about the Book of Creation, didn’t you?”

For Horinouchi, that was an important element of their upcoming enemy.

But Kagami smiled a little and shrugged before speaking.

“Well, it is really more the story of my sister. Just because she has that does not mean she can do anything about us. And all I can tell you is what happened and what its powers are. ...Should I tell you that here?”

“We’re on the bus, you know?”

“I can use a noise-cancelation spell,” suggested Mary.

Horinouchi held out a hand to say “wait” just as Hunter, who had previously grown silent in front of some kind of communication spell, suddenly turned her spell circle around for them to see. She turned back from the seat in front and asked a question.

“Oh, should we call Fleur?”

Horinouchi had recently noticed that Hunter seemed more willing to make requests when she knew someone better.

But besides that, this particular request was rare.

“You can contact Fleur?”

“The Special Equipment Division tends to act as a manager on the scene, so the European U.A.H. Representative seems to come to me for that kind of thing.”

Is that so? wondered Horinouchi as Mary nodded and spoke while viewing Tokyo Bay through the window.

“There is no sign of the enemy, so it should be fine. ...And I am worried about her too.”

Since Horinouchi and Kagami would be the main fighters on Hexennacht, Lisbeth must not have wanted to burden them with managing the group on top of that. When it came to their effective authority, they tended to decide things as a group, but Mary rarely took the initiative and Hunter tended to defer to Horinouchi and Kagami.

“In that case, we will have to decide. ...How about it, Horinouchi? Are you ready for a reunion with the person you slashed at and held to your giant breasts just the other day?”

“There was a lot of unnecessary noise in that question, but I don’t mind.”

However...

“Will Fleur be all right with it?”

...If I had to say whether there’s any hope for her, I’d have to say no.

That was Hunter’s opinion of Fleur’s chances as a witch.

During the last Ranker Battle against her as the Rank 1, she had lost her mother who had acted as her servant. The academy had also lost its headmaster which effectively left them without someone to negotiate with the other nations, but Lisbeth had filled that role.

But Fleur was not so lucky.

Her environment spell used a massive amount of ether and she had been getting a lot of help from her mother in order to control it all.

More specifically, Fleur had handled the acquisition and use of the ether while her mother had kept it stable and otherwise supported her.

...In that case, Fleur has plenty of her own talent.

She was like a framework and a powerful engine. That might look cool as a drag racer, but without a maintenance crew, she could not corner or brake as a car.

“She’s tried a few things, but she apparently loses control every time.”

“Does it go off on its own?”

“From what I’ve heard, not anymore. Even if she uses a small spell, the power is so great that it quickly grows saturated and bursts.”

“So she lacks a controller,” said Kagami while bringing the dragon child out onto her shoulder.

Instead of just looking over her shoulder, Hunter had brought her knees up onto the seat to completely turned around to face the back.

“That’s why she’s staying at the dorm for the training ground in the reconstructed region of north Kantou even though she’s part of the Honors Division.”

“Eh?”

Horinouchi frowned at that one. She said “umm...” while looking the other way, so Kagami nodded and patted her shoulder.

“Yes, yes. That is right, Horinouchi. Fleur is living the farming life now because you hinted that the flowers blooming there were left by the Lady Headmaster.”

“I-I wasn’t asking her to do that!”

“It’s probably part of her rehabilitation now that she’s lost her servant,” said Hunter.

“That’s right,” Mary as she turned sideways to look back. “Without her servant, she can’t control her power. The Spell Division’s nursing and healing classes teach that living in an environment separate from spells is the best way to remind her how to use her own power.”

“That’s it. She could have stayed at Shihouin Academy and gone through rehabilitation by stacking up blocks by hand and things like that, but Shihouin is pretty busy right now and it would probably be cruel to have her just sit around in the same place as her mother’s grave.”

That last part was on Lisbeth’s instructions.

Is that being too strict? Hunter wondered, but she had trouble saying since she had been supported and raised by witches after losing her father.

“That said, her life there has stabilized, so she’s apparently returning once before Hexennacht to figure out what to do about her personal items here and the Headmaster’s grave below the academy. ...And since she’ll be visiting, we’re supposed to deal with her.”

“Wait, when was that decision made?”

“Just a bit ago. ...Lisbeth said she couldn’t handle it because someone caused trouble.”

Horinouchi brought her hand to her head and Kagami simply laughed next to her.

“That means we have no other choice when it comes to Fleur for today,” said Kagami. “We can prepare some way of passing the time tomorrow, so it might be best to discuss the Book of Creation now.”

Mary opened a spell circle.

Hunter immediately checked the bus driver’s seat. The driver was looking their way, so she displayed a Ranker ID sign frame and a “classified business” sign frame that used the authority of American U.A.H. She then cast them both toward him.

Using that, she could rent out normal transportation, especially more flexible ones like buses, but they only wanted to talk right now.

She raised a hand, made eye contact, and pointed forward. The driver seemed to mistake what she meant because he stepped on the gas, but...*Well, close enough.*

“Are the bus lanes busy today?”

“Brigadier General, Most public transportation finished transporting evacuees in the midafternoon, so I think only the lanes heading back will be congested.”

Mary’s really getting used to life here if she looked into that in advance, thought Hunter.

Then Kagami clapped her hands once. The sound spread out, but it did not echo back. *That’s an annihilation type, isn’t it?* thought Hunter, considering Mary’s specialty. Then Kagami spoke.

“As I said before, this world and many other worlds were created by my sister. I was used to find fault in them. And what my sister discovered and used as a collection of documents was the Book of Creation.”

Kagami remembered a few clear divisions.

...It began with that statement by Shouko.

It had been a love story with an Egyptian setting. As the older sister, Kagami had seen it as an important step when her sister first attempted a romance story. It had been an excellent drama of love and hate from those who had known each other in a past life but had only realized their feelings after being reborn, but Kagami’s first thought had been “Aren’t they doing today what they should be doing tomorrow?” And when she told her sister that, Shouko had scolded her:

...Why don’t you understand romance, Kagami!?

But the culture, civilization, or atmosphere depicted there had certainly seemed to be on a different level from before.

“Yes, it had a different atmosphere.”

“Kagami, when you suddenly comment on your own thoughts, we can’t know what you’re talking about.”

She had no choice but to explain everything she had been thinking. And then...

“It was not about the food or the politics. It was...the temperature? How dry the air was, how much that makes you sweat, the scent of the wind,

the...‘flavor’ of the sand, I guess you would call it. How it felt to trudge through the sand. It was all written there in the text.”

“It was written there?”

“It was,” she replied. “It was almost written like she had found documents describing it all and could not help but use it. So I remember feeling a harsh difference between the main story and those sensory aspects.”

“And what did your sister say?”

“ ‘Oh, yeah, you can tell!?’ She seemed delighted by it. ...It was not a document or a report, so I asked her if she could write something I would want to read.”

And what happened after that?

“Next it was Europe. The story took place in a mountainous region at around 3000 BCE. It was a magic story based on a megalith culture and...come to think of it, there is someone in our class who uses stones, isn’t there?”

“If you mean Aria Notice, she’s been traveling between her assigned post and the quarry in Yamanashi to help defend Yokosuka.”

“What kind of spell does she use?” asked Hunter.

Kagami started to explain because it was amusing, but she was stopped by the girl next to her.

Regardless, what had happened with her sister?

“After that, it was a historic-seeming story that took place in ancient China. It was about performing flood control on a large river while being oppressed by a great force. It had no romance or fantasy elements, so I quite liked it and rated it well.”

“Are you referring to magic as fantasy...?”

Horinouchi glared at her, so she gestured for her to calm down. Horinouchi then tilted her head.

“From what you’re saying, it sounds like it wasn’t so much the stories that changed. It’s more like the background or the setting rapidly gained more

depth.”

“Well done noticing that, Horinouchi.”

“You’re exaggerating,” she said, but Kagami was not about to agree with that.

“I noticed the same thing as you, but I forgot to wonder why that was. I simply thought my sister, Shouko, was working hard at her stories. But that was a mistake on my part.”

After all...

“By that time, she had already found the Book of Creation and had most likely begun interacting with it.”

The word “interacting” felt off to Mary.

She had already heard Kagami talk about her sister when they were back in Mary’s world, but that relationship with the Book of Creation had not seemed out of the ordinary since it was a common thing in her world.

But after living in this world for a while, Mary’s standards had changed and it sounded different to her.

Also, she could use this world to picture Kagami’s world which had lost all spells. That likely meant she had grown and expanded her viewpoint, but...

“That’s strange.”

“What is, Mary?”

“The word ‘interacting’,” she said. “In my world and this world, it is not unusual to find artifacts with a will of their own. But, Brigadier General, you claimed there were no spells or even detectable ether in your world. So how could your sister ‘interact’ with a book?”

That had sounded perfectly normal to her before, but after living here, she knew how strange it was.

“There shouldn’t have been any spells in your world...so it’s strange for that book to be the lone exception.”

Oh, that's right, thought Hunter.

“For that book to be an intelligent artifact, Kagami’s world would have to have ether and spells, but as far as Kagami knew, neither of those things existed there.”

That was a contradiction. How could that work?

“It seems a certain law existed in my world.”

“What was that?”

“Contradiction allowance,” answered Kagami. “All contradictions are ultimately ‘allowed’. And thus it was not a problem. Or so the Book of Creation told Shouko.”

Hold on, now, thought Hunter as she saw Horinouchi’s mouth spread horizontally.

Hunter knew very well what the girl wanted to say.

“Wouldn’t contradiction allowance be the ultimate law that means ‘anything goes’ in the end?”

“Yes. But that power should at least exist in this world and the others I have seen. Because my sister made them with the Book of Creation.”

Kagami leaned back in her chair a bit, crossed her legs, and took a breath.

“When I praised her for how well she put together her settings, she got all excited and brought out a book. She apparently found it in our father’s library and it looked like a hardcover that had been remade a few times. My sister claimed it was an amazing history book and that it would answer anything she asked of it. ...I could not read what it said, it was made of something like a cloth instead of paper, and it appeared to be brand new, so I assumed it was something my sister had made. I thought it was a little strange, but I did not believe in such artifacts at the time. So I thought she had a dictionary or app to translate it into Japanese and that she was working to keep the truth from me.”

Also...

“She eventually stopped bringing it out to me. Instead, she would allude to her interactions with it. She would say it ‘told her’ about something or that it had ‘answered’ her question. ...I just thought it was a figurative way of talking about a book she was obsessed with and I thought that was acceptable since the background worlds for her stories had grown much more precise, even when they were original. Artists are always a bit eccentric, after all.”

“Well, I suppose you would think that in a world without spells or that kind of artifact.”

“But how did you learn the Book of Creation was an artifact?”

“I did not, even in the very end. ...I was still ignorant when I was sent to the first world and it was only after seeing a few worlds destroyed that I realized these worlds were ones my sister had created. And that they were only the ones she created after growing so obsessed with that book. ...I found intelligent artifacts to be ordinary parts of the destroyed worlds and I was shocked when the pieces started fitting together in my mind.”

She continued with a self-admonishing “but”.

“I do remember what I said just before my sister stopped bringing the book out to me. When she continued to insist that it spoke to her, I asked her why, if what she was saying was true, there were no other such books or phenomena in the world.”

“That *would* be a pretty good point in a world without that kind of thing.”

Oh, that exasperated look on Horinouchi’s face seems rare.

The bus slowed as it passed through a checkpoint between the bridge and the mainland. A left at the intersection led to Yokohama, straight led to Kawasaki, and right led to Shinagawa.

“Oh.”

Hunter grabbed onto her chair back as the bus made a wide right turn with more momentum than normal. It started down the bus lane toward Shinagawa.

“The evacuation congestion has mostly cleared up, hasn’t it?”

Mary pointed that out while looking up into the sky out the window, so

Kagami nodded.

“Is that a testament to how well my sister made the world? Or did the world only become this way after the creator left? ...I would suggest the latter, but my thinking did not reach that point at the time.”

...I should have noticed back then.

“Kagami? What did your sister say when you pointed that out?”

“She snorted and said all of that sort of power had been combined into that book of hers.”

“That’s a pretty good excuse.”

“Thank you, Hunter. That is what I thought too.”

So she had asked another question:

“Why had the person who made the book done that? If such a convenient power really existed, would it not be better for it to be distributed across the world?”

“And what did she say?”

“She could not answer and never again let me see the book.”

“Hmm,” said the other 3 while covering their faces with their hands.

“...That’s a tricky one,” said Horinouchi.

“If that artifact was real, then your sister really would have seen you as a stubborn big sister...” said Hunter.

“When I heard about this before, Brigadier General, I was on your side, but now...” said Mary.

“Well, that just means I am not a perfect person. That was the one and only mistake in my life.”

Horinouchi gave her an amazing look.

“But anyway,” said Kagami. “What my sister said was true. And she has created and destroyed several worlds. Many of which were made based on advice from me. ...But someone helped her do so.”

“...That would be the Book of Creation, wouldn't it?”

“Amaze.”

The other 3's eyes widened when she spoke that name with a bitter smile.

That reaction was amusing, but not surprising.

“That is apparently the Book of Creation's name. My sister told me, but do you know what I said when she did?”

After a pause, Hunter raised her right hand.

“If it was a super ancient artifact, why is its name an English word?”

“Exactly. ...But I should have noticed. First, that people are more easily swayed by what they agree with than by a sound argument, but also that my sister had already begun interacting with the Book of Creation.”

“Then,” said Horinouchi. “Was Amaze a name your sister gave to the Book of Creation?”

“Exactly. Well done, Horinouchi! Now, do you know what that means?”

They should. This was a world of artifacts. It was the territory of witches. So...

“As its namer, my sister uses the Book of Creation as what you call a servant in this world. The owner and the possession. They accepted each other and can thus use ‘creation’ that exists higher than this world's laws.”

Horinouchi felt like she had just heard something unbelievable.

Mary had heard this before, but she must have gotten something different out of it this time because her lips twisted into a frown.

And Hunter was indeed an engineer from the Special Equipment Division:

“Being able to make anything and ignore all the laws is just plain cheating.”

“Is it, though? I have high hopes for you all. Especially Horinouchi.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

Kagami turned to face her.

Their gazes audibly met and Kagami spoke before the tremor could fill Horinouchi's entire body.

"Everyone holds infinite possibilities. Do you know what I mean?"

Knowing her, there had to be some twist to this. So when she mentioned "possibilities", she meant more than whether you could or could not do something.

Most likely, the infinite part was what mattered. Because they were talking about the Black Witch's ability to use *creation which ignored the world's laws*.

So when thinking of creation in terms of the infinite...

"...You mean imagination, don't you?" She seemed to be asking for confirmation. "The act of creation requires that you first have the idea to make something. And that is the power of imagination. Even if the Black Witch has infinite creation, she is still limited by her own imagination. So..."

There was one thing that could be infinite.

"We just have to surpass the Black Witch's imagination."

Mary heard Hunter mutter the power phrase "well done" under her breath.

...*Well done...!*

She repeated it in her own mind, but that was exactly right. To add some of Hunter's native language that would be "Yes, well done!" Thus...

"I think so too," confidently said Mary. "Miss Horinouchi's imagination will be effective against the Black Witch. That much is certain."

"F-flattering me like that won't actually give me any ideas about what to do."

"No." Hunter shook her head. "Anyone who has been on the receiving end of your attacks would say the same thing."

"It's called learning from experience," said Hunter, completely deadpan.

Horinouchi covered her face with her hands and turned toward the window, so had they said something wrong?

“...Oh.”

The bus came to a stop, just like it had a few times already since arriving on the mainland.

They were 3 stops away from the usual place at Shinagawa. That reminded Mary of something: “Rank 3, where did you arrange to meet the former Rank 1?”

“I figured the station area would be crowded today, so I told her to come straight to the family restaurant. I did send her a map, but I also told to call me with her phone if she had any trouble.” Hunter seemed to realize something. “Oh, and Fleur isn’t even using spell circles as part of her rehabilitation, so I guess she’s effectively living just like Kagami would have in her world. ...I’m guessing she’s in a train approaching Shinagawa right about now.”

Now, I’ve done it, wholeheartedly thought Fleur in the nighttime crowd.

...This is bad. This is really bad. I just keep forgetting things. If mama was here, she’d scold me, but if she was here, I bet I wouldn’t have forgotten it in the first place, so I’m just hopeless right now!

But no amount of complaining was going to improve this.

She had screwed up regardless.

“...I didn’t buy any gifts.”

The light from Shinagawa Station behind her was interrupted by the shadows of people moving this way and that. They seemed to be taking a break as far as evacuations for Hexennacht were concerned, but she could still hear voices telling people where the gathering spots for different regions were and where the lines for high-speed buses were. Of the normal people, the elderly and those with insufficient combat spell training were being urged to evacuate while those with sufficient training were forming a volunteer unit of defenders.

According to the dorm mother, support was arriving from Scandinavia, Australia, and other regions latitudinally removed from Japan, where Hexennacht would primarily be fought.

They were coming from the far north and south because, during the previous Hexennacht, the damage had begun at the point of the barrier from Tokyo Bay to the ocean off of Kanagawa and had spread along the rotation of the earth from there.

But that had nothing to do with her now.

...Gifts!

“Since you’re going all the way there to visit,” the dorm mother had told her, “you should bring them something.”

The woman seemed to be using a fairly limited vocabulary, but the odds were good she had mistaken Fleur for a foreigner due to her name. But 2 hours ago, the train had left while she tried to decide whether she should buy some food at the station. And at the time she had only thought “Whoa, it’s moving!”. She had not noticed her automatic failure to buy any gifts until she got off the train, told herself “Did I forget anything? I don’t think so. Nope, definitely not!”, and then realized the truth with a horrifying sensation like everything she had eaten was exiting through her butt.

I can’t believe this.

The dorm mother had told her that gifts were important. After all, they implicitly told someone that her home was safe and prosperous.

“Is it a type of good luck charm?”

“Yes. Part of it is bringing them a piece of that location, but it also shows that you are doing well enough to send them a gift like that.”

What the woman had said next was important.

“And the Rank 1 there is Miss Horinouchi, isn’t it? She is from a shrine, so you should probably follow that kind of etiquette with her.”

That had affected her the most.

What would happen if she failed to be polite?

...Will she slash me and fire on me from point-blank range again...?

She doubted that, but on the way here, she had heard about that duo scaring

people by suddenly summoning their Magino Devices for no reason.

Did that mean they were already prepared to fight?

And what would happen if she impolitely showed up with no gifts?

...They'd probably blow away the family restaurant.

Did anywhere around here sell products from northern Kantou? And the Rank 3 had probably thought she was being considerate, but the directions she had sent to Fleur's cellphone were as follows:

"Once out of the station, follow the main road for 200m. Face north there and you'll see a hawk emblem sign. Head in that direction for 53m."

Are these supposed to be mission instructions or something?

Well, if I get in trouble, I'll just use a taxi, she decided just before noticing how congested the roads heading down that way looked.

Oh, no.

...Maybe I should use a spell circle to search for the route.

But she immediately shook her hand and stopped. She was in rehabilitation.

She must not use spells.

After losing her mama, she had started having trouble with her spell ability.

If I had been more skilled at controlling spells, I wouldn't have put as much of a burden on mama. So I can't rely on spells during rehabilitation, but what am I supposed to do about the gifts and arriving at the meeting point, mama? This is when I really want to rely on you, mama! Isn't there a saying in Japanese describing this feeling, mama!? Oh, I know!

"By the time you want to show filial piety, your parents are gone."

...No!!

If anything, that's backwards. Sorry, mama.

"Hmm."

She told herself to calm down and set her priorities.

First, she had to think about finding some gifts here. The traffic situation

would change while she dealt with that, so she could put off figuring out how to get to the meeting point until later.

So for now she needed to look for a map.

With a station this big, it was sure to have a map of the station and the surrounding area. Then she had to use that to find somewhere she could buy the gifts. But...

“Where’s the map?”

To be blunt, there were spell circle displays. But those were controlled by one’s own ether readings. And that meant she could not use them during rehabilitation. She had even gone out of her way to buy a non-reactive ticket on the way here. She wondered if this insistence on following her own rules just made her hardheaded.

She checked the road in front of Shinagawa Station and the walls of the surrounding buildings, but there was no information sign anywhere.

...I’m screwed, mama!

Her mother would probably not know what to do with these constant updates, but what else was she supposed to do?

“...Ah.”

She saw someone leaving the station.

They stood out because they wore a school uniform different from the one Fleur was wearing now.

...And she’s coming out.

Overall, Shinagawa Station was sucking people in. That was partially because it was time for people to be headed home, but it was also an entrance for evacuees.

If that school uniform girl was leaving, did that mean she was a local?

“Um.”

Wanting to ask someone who knew the area, Fleur spoke up.

And she tried to be as friendly as possible so she would not seem suspicious.

“Do you have a moment for me, cutie?”

The girl holding a white handbag by her side did not even try to hide the suspicion in her eyes.

Chapter 4: If Some Return

Chapter 4

“If Some Return”



If I seem full of energy from the outside
Am I looking at myself from the outside?

If I seem full of energy from the outside

Am I looking at myself from the outside?

The girl had gained a strange companion.

Based on the school uniform worn by the other girl accompanying her through Shinagawa Station, she was from Shihouin Academy.

That was the school where witches gathered and competed to be the world's best.

That school seemed so far removed from the girl's life. Both the witches and the chest-accentuating stitching option available on the uniform. And this companion seemed the same as far as that second one was concerned.

Her name was Fleur.

The girl was curious, so she looked into where this girl ranked at Shihouin Academy. Any Shihouin witch would be registered in the world witch rankings. Or they should have been, but...

"...She isn't there?"

"I can't find her name or anything else in Shihouin Academy's registry."

This seemed somewhat awkward, but the girl tried asking while guiding Fleur to the gift shops inside Shinagawa Station.

"That uniform is from Shihouin Academy, right? Aren't you busy right now?"

"Ohh, due to, um, reasons, I'm rehabi-...training in the reconstructed area of north Kantou."

"So they have a trainee system?"

"Kinda like that, yeah!"

There seemed to be more to this, but digging into it any further would not accomplish anything.

"I believe there is a Shihouin student dorm in the north Kantou reconstructed area," said the voice from the girl's handbag. "Their pamphlet says, 'To increase

your spell power, work in this reconstructed land and train your mind and body to thrice their previous strength’.”

“Thrice?”

She might be tougher than she looks, thought the girl, but she also felt some relief. If she was training somewhere like that, Fleur would not have much of a connection to the Tokyo Bay Shihouin Academy.

So I should be fine, she thought while letting her guard down.

“This shop sells specialties from different regions.”

“That one?”

“This one.”

She corrected Fleur’s pointing finger and walked through the station, but they did not have to walk far.

Once she saw the line of counters that looked a lot like stalls, Fleur dashed over.

“...Oh, you sure are full of energy.”

“I’m gushing with it!”

Is that really how you want to describe it?

The girl had honestly been planning to leave after showing Fleur the way, but Fleur turned back.

“This is amazing! I can actually pull through with this!”

If she had said “thank you” or “that was a huge help!”, the girl could have waved goodbye.

But sometimes it was hard to find a good ending point.

Would a witch call this a jinx? But even for the girl...

“What do I do?”

“It’s still a lot earlier than last night,” said the handbag.

She decided to move up alongside Fleur and view the north Kantou products with her, but...

“Fleur, this is the Kyushu section.”

“That’s close enough! It should work!”

The girl decided to just assume Fleur was giving it to someone who would be fine with that. But she decided she should probably ask about it when Fleur started comparing a few wooden swords.

“How old is the person this is for?”

“Oh, she’s my age, but she’s more like my mama.”

“Is she grown up?”

“Yeah. Her boobs are pretty incredible.”

...So it’s about the chest-accentuating stitching!

Witches are amazing... she thought, but could a witch’s life experience really cause that much of a difference at the same age? And that brought another question to mind:

“Fleur, which year are you in?”

“3rd year. What about you?”

“Oh, um, 3rd year.”

“Ahh! So we’re the same!”

“Yeah,” confirmed the girl while thinking something different.

...Oh, no... I’m only in the 3rd year of middle school...

She’s really acting like we’re equals, she thought, but why was it Fleur actually seemed younger than her? Fleur herself was slowly but surely moving to the Tohoku pickled foods section.

“Maybe this would be best since I bet everyone thinks I’m someone who swings a hoe around to grow flowers.”

“Would someone your age really want something pickled...?”

“But the dorm mother said food makes a good gift because it doesn’t stick around! Think of it that way!”

In that case, the T-shirts, keychains, and lacquered chopsticks were off the

table.

Fleur had been looking at a bag in a corner that said “Kiritanpo with One Character Wrong!”^[2], but who made that? *It wasn't me.*

Please don't buy it, she willed Fleur and it seemed to work. *Do I have psychic powers?*

Then they looked at what was lined up on the counter.

There was hard candy, but Shihouin Academy had to be busy. It seemed wrong to send that to someone in such a rushed place.

“And the fugashi package is a little big.”

“Kinakobo!”

“Don't you want something with more individuality?”

Oh, I'm saying the kind of thing my sister would.

And yet she had promised herself long ago that she would not just randomly shoot down other people's ideas.

But Fleur was different.

How was she different? She was different from the girl. So Fleur simply smiled.

“Oh, I get it! Individuality! Yeah, it has to show where I came from!”

In that case, checking the Okinawa section would not work, but after hearing that line spoken straight to her...

...Ah.

Someone else had just hit her with the same thing she had said constantly in the past.

And it really affected her.

The excuse that they were two different people did not seem like anything more than an excuse.

Instead of interpreting the situation differently, it felt like the truth was passing her right by. And when faced with that...

“————”

She realized she had grown a little stubborn. She could not correct it right away, but she was certain that the warm sweat on her back came from her appreciation for Fleur who she had only just met.

And Fleur spoke to her with a few products in hand.

“Sorry about keeping you from getting home on time.”

“No, it’s fine. ...I was only stopping by a family restaurant for some food before heading home.”

“A family restaurant!?”

Fleur really leapt at that one and the girl felt overwhelmed by the intensity.

“Um, yes. The Safe Restaurant over there.”

“That’s it!”

What is? wondered the girl, but Fleur grabbed her hands and shook them up and down.

“How wonderful! I want to stay with you forever for today!”

What is going on? But you’re gathering attention, so stop. Just stop.

“Huh? Is Fleur still not here?”

Hunter tilted her head in front of a lit building below the dark sky.

“Wouldn’t Fleur be confused if she got here ahead of us?” asked Horinouchi.

“I thought of that, so I told her to wait if we weren’t there yet. There was a margin of error of about 2 or 3 minutes.”

She looked down the road toward Shinagawa Station, but there were no Shihouin uniforms walking below the streetlights.

After disembarking from the bus, they heard an FA-18 passing overhead on the way to Yokosuka. The city seemed stiller than normal and there were fewer cars than normal, but...

“Wait a second.”

Hunter used a spell circle to connect to Fleur's cellphone via the communication line.

"...Isn't that going way out of the way?" asked Horinouchi.

"Oh, well, this technically belongs to American U.A.H. That means all of the related fees are managed by them, so any time I use it has to have something to do with the 7th Fleet."

"...I can only guess, but that is using a satellite for part of the journey, isn't it?" asked Kagami.

"Rank 3, aren't you going a little too far for a personal call?" asked Mary.

"Don't ask how much it costs! Don't you dare ask! Got that!?"

"Wouldn't it be better if I just called her instead...?"

"Horinouchi!" said Kagami. "This is part of the management mission that Lisbeth gave to Hunter! So it would be best to put it all on a bill we send to Lisbeth."

I think that's exactly what I'll do. But anyway...

"What is it, Hunter!?" said the woman on the spell circle. "Calling from Shinagawa!? What geographic point do you want us to send a spell missile strike to!? You can mark it, can't you!? Yes!"

"Hey, A-un Silver Coin!" shouted another voice. "The sea is rough after creating those Magino Devices, so don't fire from the SS! The higher ups have been saying they want to see the Michael Monsoor fired, so use that! We can get away with 2 shots or so that way!"

Don't just decide that on your own. And what am I supposed to do with this GPS that appeared on the right?

"Kagami, is there a restaurant around here you don't like?"

"That Gyudon – Kiraiya place with the sign over there had a pretty bad mayo gyudon, but I have no hard feelings."

"I started targeting it, so don't make feints like that!"

"What in the world are you doing, Hunter?" asked Horinouchi.

Okay, okay. I'll make the call.

After some static as it connected, she heard the noise clear up as it entered the allotted space meant to ensure privacy, but...

...Hm?

She checked the spell circle and found the number she had called either did not have a signal or was powered off.

“Oh, Fleur’s phone is old, so it’s probably drowned out by all the spell communication waves,” explained Horinouchi. “That’s bound to happen at this time of day in a train station like Shinagawa.”

“Then she must have made it to Shinagawa Station.”

If she had gotten lost, the call would have gotten through.

This is actually pretty easy to figure out, thought Hunter as Kagami placed a hand on her forehead and fanned her body.

“Horinouchi...does this still count as a call for Hunter’s communication spell?”

Hunter looked back to see Horinouchi hold a hand to her mouth and avert her gaze.

“Yes...it would.”

“Oh, shut up! Don’t ask how much it costs! Don’t you dare!”

“How much is it, Rank 3?”

“...Including the security, about 20 thousand...maybe? But that’s pretty cheap all things considered!”

They all covered their faces and turned their backs.

What are we supposed to do about this? wondered Horinouchi. She was aware her mouth was twisted and Kagami indicated a three-way junction off of the main road instead of the main road itself.

This path bordered a building that was surrounded by an “under construction” cover and had remained untouched afterwards. It was only a

difference of about 30 meters, but it apparently meant a lot to a local like Kagami.

“This way is actually shorter when coming from Shinagawa Station. ...Of course, this assumes Fleur notices it.”

The road cutting by in front of the restaurant bordered a wide river on the left. The family restaurant they would gather at provided a view of Shihouin Academy thanks to that river.

...It's kind of strange.

Shihouin was visible from a place those sisters remembered fondly, but had that been caused by the Black Witch's creation? If so, the Black Witch was a warped individual. If not, this world was harsh to the Black Witch.

But if Fleur came along the route Kagami had mentioned, she would be able to see Shihouin the entire way. That would provide a landmark, but...

...Hunter didn't tell her that much.

However, Hunter glared at Kagami and lightly raised her left hand.

“Kagami? ...Isn't that only true if the Black Witch made things that way?”

It took Horinouchi a second to realize what she meant.

...That's true!

Kagami must have realized the same thing because she slapped her forehead.

“My apologies! You are correct! It might be different.”

“Well, it is true we always arrive by bus,” said Horinouchi. “Have you ever come here via Shinagawa Station, Kagami?”

“No, no,” said Kagami as she shook her hands. “It seems I am surprisingly trusting of Shouko.”

“But, Brigadier General, if everything else around her is how you remember it, it seems only natural to assume the rest is too.”

“Should I run on over and check?” asked Hunter

“Can't we just check the city map on a spell circle?”

Kagami stopped Horinouchi as she raised a hand.

“No, it would be crass to check on the truth. I would appreciate it if we kept this the way it is.”

How complicated, thought Horinouchi, but she also realized a certain truth.

“My hostility toward the Black Witch has softened a lot more than I thought.”

Horinouchi saw Hunter and the others quickly turn back toward her.

“Are you okay, Horinouchi!? Losing your hostility isn’t going to lower your attack power, is it!?”

“That’s right, Miss Horinouchi!? Your hostility is our overpowered ATK! The carefree killer intent I felt when you shot me from the pole really squeezed at my spine! In a bad way!”

“Ha ha ha. Your deadly power is quite popular, Manko.”

“What are all of you saying!? And that last one! I don’t like that look that says, ‘I might as well say it since the others did’!”

But she did look at this different than before.

“This is very complicated.”

“What is?”

“From what I’ve heard from you, Kagami, this world has less to do with the Black Witch than it does recreations of your sister’s memories.”

Before meeting Kagami, she had only thought of the Black Witch as toying with and then destroying the world.

But that was wrong.

“I wouldn’t be able to destroy the memories of my mother.”

Hunter and Mary were likely the same. If they were fighting for what they had lost, they would not be able to reject what they had lost. But...

“Why is the Black Witch trying to destroy this world?”

“Ah,” said Hunter when she realized what Horinouchi was trying to say.

Horinouchi probably understood the contradiction in what she was saying, but her feelings had not fully grasped it yet.

Meaning...

“The Black Witch is trying to destroy her memories?”

“Yes. Kagami just now assumed that a back way only they knew would be here, and it might indeed be here. She’s recreated it to that level, but then there are the things about Utsunomiya being the kingdom of gyoza and frog not being available at Yokohama.”

“Miss Horinouchi, you’re getting sidetracked in a weird way.”

“Try to understand,” said Hunter. “This means she’s memorized everything Kagami has ever said.”

“Y-you! Don’t make any weird interpretations of this!”

At any rate, it would be best to ask someone who was involved, or at least related.

“What’s the meaning of this, Kagami?”

“I would imagine that is because my sister was ill and saw no future in her own world.”

Horinouchi remembered hearing something about that early on and it made some sense to her. But...

“You would imagine? So are you just guessing here, Kagami?” asked Horinouchi. “Listen, we do not *understand* the Black Witch.”

After thinking on Horinouchi’s words for a moment, Mary nodded.

...*That’s true.*

She wanted to eliminate the Black Witch.

The Black Witch had killed, erased, and annihilated the others from her world. And partially just for fun.

“I cannot forgive her for what she did.”

That much was certain. But at the same time...

“It is true we do not know much about the Black Witch.”

Until now, they had simply assumed that this was how the Black Witch was.

But there were some questions.

“Based on what Kagami has said, it doesn’t sound like the Black Witch created this world to destroy it,” said Horinouchi. “Of course, a lot has been lost and we all have our own thoughts on the matter. Everyone in this world probably does. And many of us won’t be able to forgive her. That means she cannot be allowed to exist any longer. But...”

“But? But what?”

“The Black Witch wants to destroy this world for some reason. Unless we figure out why that is, we are no different in our desire to destroy the Black Witch.”

“That’s true.” Mary spoke while thinking about the standards inside themselves. “I cannot forgive the Black Witch. So I do feel a need to destroy her with all my might and there is no way of undoing what she has done.”

But...

“I did the same thing. Yes, I tried to.”

She had tried to erase Kagami because she could not forgive her.

But Kagami had accepted the fight, heard her out, and chosen not to criticize her.

Mary had been that way. And...

“I was just about to become a ‘fool’ too,” said Hunter as she looked to Kagami. “Kagami, can you do to your sister what you did to us?”

“Well...”

Kagami wrinkled her brow.

And in that instant, Horinouchi spoke up.

“Kagami, you are surprisingly awkward.” The shrine maiden put on a small smile. “You are so tolerant when it comes to victims, the weak, or those in danger, but you are so harsh when it comes to aggressors, the strong, or those who put others in danger. ...That might be the proper form for those with power, but if you oppose the aggressors, the strong, and those who put others in danger in the same way, then we will be standing in the same position as our opponent.”

So...

“Since you guided us this far, we want you to do the same thing for your sister. If you don’t, we will become the same as the Black Witch.”

“Yeah, I don’t want this to be a case where the hero who defeats the monster turns into a monster herself.”

Hunter was exactly right.

And Kagami had prevented them from doing that so far.

“Brigadier General.”

Mary found she understood why Kagami had done that.

“Were you hoping that only you would become a monster because you will be leaving this world after we win? ...Were you thinking of wrapping this all up in that way?”

She’s such an idiot, thought Horinouchi with a small smile.

She did not know if Mary was correct, but...

“We have our own thoughts and we aren’t powerless. Also, the Geo Frame is needed to destroy the Black Witch and that requires us to work together.”

So...

“It is no longer possible for only you to become like the Black Witch and turn into a monster. At the very least, it will affect me as well.”

She said it. And after a while...

“ ... ”

Hunter and Mary gave some scattered applause. Some citizens and witches passing by also noticed her and joined the applause.

“Wh-what is this about!?”

“You should know since you’re the one that said it.”

...*Eh?*

Did I say something bad? But she was more interested in Kagami’s reaction to her words.

She noticed the white-haired girl had closed her eyes.

“————”

After taking a breath and laughing through her nose, she looked to Horinouchi. It was a direct, testing look.

...*Ah.*

Sensing that Kagami was going to do something to her, she tensed up, but she kept herself from moving away.

It was fine.

If this girl was going to become a monster, she would stop her. And if that was not possible, she would go with her.

Was it an excuse to claim that was necessary to protect their world?

But if she did not think of it that way, she felt like her emotions were going to explode inside her.

She was clearly sending herself in a dangerous direction, but she also sensed hope there.

If it was the world that just barely kept her from forgiving herself for the irresponsibility of not caring how this turned out, did that mean she had already surpassed this world?

But then Kagami averted her gaze. She turned toward Hunter. And then toward Mary.

“You have my thanks,” said the visitor from another world as she relaxed her

body. “Perhaps it is now my time to be stopped by you.”

Horinouchi sensed relief in the air.

...That's right.

She did not know what was “right”, but she believed that it was a good thing.

She might be being idealistic and some might say she had grown soft or treacherous.

But because she could criticize the Black Witch's actions...

“Just as we don't want to be the same as the Black Witch...Kagami, we don't want you to end up that way either.”

She did look Hunter and Mary's way. And when they noticed her...

“Oh, can you include us in that too?”

“Yeah, um, us. Include us.”

“Y-you don't have to put it like that...!”

Maybe it can't be helped since the Geo Frame is between Kagami and me, she thought, but outside of that...

“But if we do have to stop the Brigadier General, how exactly will we do it?”

“...Couldn't I just wait for her to charge out ahead and then shoot her in the back?”

“Kagami, Horinouchi just said something pretty damn amazing!”

“I might need to think twice about making any careless actions!”

Well, maybe so, thought Horinouchi. And when thinking about who would be best for the job...

“Who would best be able to respond to Kagami's starting dash?”

“The Rank 3.”

“Me!?”

“Yes. So you catch up to the Brigadier General and stop her long enough for

Miss Horinouchi to shoot her.”

“I’ll be caught in the blast too, won’t I!? Won’t I!?”

“In that case, Mary and Hunter can work together to stop her.”

“What do you mean ‘in that case’, Horinouchi!?”

“I-if those are your orders, Miss Horinouchi...!”

“Horinouchi, I feel like Mary is growing less respectable, so can you do something about that?” asked Kagami.

What am I supposed to do?

That said, they were waiting for Fleur. When they peeked inside the family restaurant...

“The corner seat by the entrance is open,” commented Horinouchi. “If we wait there, won’t we be able to see Fleur no matter which road she arrives on?”

“You still have to worry about the reflection on the window,” pointed out Hunter. “And I’ll be focused on eating.”

“Yes...someone is going to have to restrain you.”

Hunter’s face stiffened at that, but it was somewhat amusing.

“Let’s go in and wait there. And Kagami? While we do...no, afterwards as well, I want to hear more about you and your sister. I want to learn any clues we can about why the Black Witch created this world and yet is trying to destroy it.”

Chapter 5: There Are Also Those Going

Chapter 5

“There Are Also Those Going”



If walking together brings us closer
Are we distant because we aren't walking together?

If walking together brings us closer

Are we distant because we aren't walking together?

The girl had not spoken with another person in a long time, so she tried to judge whether she was doing it right.

Was she talking too much?

Was she getting too excited?

Was she looking down on them?

And so on. She worried about the conversation while imagining what she looked like and how she was being seen.

But it was true that she was not changing herself to match the other person. She had no intention of making that other person uncomfortable, but she wanted to avoid restraining herself to match them.

She did not have to do that with Fleur. In fact, Fleur would not let her.

If Fleur didn't like something, she would say so. If she liked something, she would celebrate it. But she did not hold it against the girl when she did not like something. They would say what they thought and reply with how they felt, but there was no real criticism there.

The girl asked a sudden question as Fleur paid for the gifts.

"You're kind of refreshing, Fleur."

"Yeah, yeah! That's cause I took a bath!"

"No, not like that. I'm saying you just come out and say whatever you want."

"Oh, do I?"

"You do," confirmed the girl.

How should I explain this? she wondered before finding the answer.

"You don't try to persuade me."

"Hm? Did I do something wrong?"

“Eh? Well, no.”

“Then it wouldn’t make sense.”

Could you please make some sense when you speak? quietly thought the girl, but those leaps of logic seemed to be Fleur’s thing. That said, the girl could kind of see the logic that filled in the gap.

If she was not being accused of doing something wrong, there was no need of persuading the other person of anything.

...Ohh.

When choosing the gifts, Fleur had made a lot of comments about what she liked and disliked, but that had all been about personal preference.

The girl had been choosing things based on the region of origin and what a recipient would want, but Fleur had only been looking at things based on what she personally would like.

And the final selections that Fleur had lined up on the corner were the ones that they had both decided would work.

The girl had recommended things based on what was “right”, but if that was all that was needed, the things Fleur liked would have vanished from the counter.

What remained were not things that she had persuaded the girl would work or things she had selected based on some logic of her own. They were simply the things she liked.

“Oh, sorry. I was a little too presumptuous, wasn’t I?”

“Press-ump-chus?”

“Um, what I mean is...I gave some weird advice.”

“That’s fine. I mean, I got to choose them in the end. You’re the better person for helping me out, and making a mistake here isn’t going to hurt anything.”

...Ohh...

The girl grew painfully aware of her own desire for control, but she also doubted that saying that would actually get through to Fleur.

...Is she saying I can do whatever I want since I didn't do anything wrong?

The girl felt like that was not quite right, but she also had another thought: "I like the way you think."

"That's what my mama was like!"

Fleur smiled as she grabbed the bag of gifts which was quite large. She ensured the old woman behind the counter that she could carry it and then turned toward the girl.

"Mama said not to use your power when it comes to grudges or fighting over the TV channel. And I'm bringing these to the people who stopped me when I was close to doing that!"

Since Fleur was not in Shihouin Academy, did that mean she had done something when fighting over the TV channel?

She did not seem like the type to hold a grudge, but the girl had no way of knowing the actual situation.

Oh, trying to figure out someone else is a lot like trying to read their expression, she thought. And...

"—————"

Her thoughts turned to herself.

What had she been like long ago when her sister had made a lot of decisions about – or rather, critiques of – her.

She remembered trying so hard to meet her sister halfway and to read her sister's expression that she had ended up complaining that "you're always like this!" despite that contradicting her attempt to meet her halfway.

At the time, she had felt oppressed, so she had felt a need to push her sister back no matter what it took. But...

...Wow.

She had seen herself as fighting back, but had her sister even been trying to persuade her of anything?

Her sister had often spoken of the logic at the base of her likes and dislikes,

but if she had always left the ultimate decision with the girl...

...*No*.

That was not it.

Her sister had never said the decision was the girl's.

But...

"—————"

She had a thought while looking to Fleur.

The decision here had been Fleur's even though the girl had never said so.

It was contradictory to think the decision was yours only if someone else gave you authorization.

How had her sister seen it?

What is the point of this? she wondered to mentally distance herself from the issue. *Why am I thinking about this now?* she also wondered in surprise.

She had met and spoken with people like Fleur before.

So why was it only resonating with her now?

"Is something wrong?"

Fleur peered over at her from the right, so the girl shook her head.

...*I'm not sure*.

"Something reminded me of old times."

That was probably it. She had come here and learned that a familiar person had come here. When she had reached out her hand, that person had scolded her.

So was she able to think like this now because she had grown up? If so...

"Fleur. Shall we go?" The girl pointed out of the station. "You're incredible, Fleur. More than I imagined."

"I am incredible."

When Fleur agreed, hope filled the girl.

“And the people who helped you out must be incredible too.”

“Hey, Hunter! Why do you have to grab the fries with your hands!?”

“Oh, c’mon. It’s too soon to become a mom, Horinouchi. Wait like 5 more years.”

“Brigadier General, please stop placing your order by saying, ‘I want everything from here to here’.”

“Mary, the standard life is not enough! Meeting people is what matters! Meeting people!”

“Wait, that’s way too much, Kagami! Keep it low enough that I can write it off as a Student Council expense!”

“Um, in that case...waiter, I want everything from here to here.”

“What did I just say!?”

Fleur was kind of hopeful about this girl with her.

She had not asked the girl’s name. After all, her mother had often told her it was rude to carelessly ask a witch her name because it might involve her true name.

Fleur’s own name was not a problem because her spell forms had been created jointly with her mother. And she was presently not exactly living as a witch.

They walked down the road.

It was still not quite night, but the late October sky was plenty dark. *It was even darker at the dorm*, she thought, but this was normal for here. It was the same as when she had tended to the courtyard. She remembered what the sky looked like at different times.

And she realized something about the girl as she spoke to her.

...*She’s smart!*

Back when they had been buying the gifts, the girl had proven to know a lot about the specialty products, geographies, and histories of different regions of Japan. That seemed like a lot of information, but that might just be the way of things for a knowledge-type witch.

And the tempo of conversation was different.

When speaking with her mother, conversations had been all about a rapid back and forth. When they had disagreed on something, they would sometimes just agree to disagree. And even when one or the other conceded to the other's side, they knew that was a plus. That was all because they were confident in the fact that they cared for each other.

Conversations with the Honors Division had been all about individualism. To show the proper respect to each other, they had generally never gotten any closer to each other.

She had envied the General Division on that front, but she had stayed where she was because her spells and abilities would have stood out.

That had kept her from making any friends and it had extended her life in the courtyard as the Rank 1.

But now she was successfully speaking with the girl walking alongside her.

They were not just throwing words back and forth like with her mother, but she was not keeping her distance from a complete stranger either.

They were talking about things they wanted to talk about. Fleur would tell the girl about things that happened at the dorm. The girl would tell Fleur about her family. If Fleur did not understand, she would make a joke. If it was funny, she would laugh.

Most of it was complaining, but they both partially agreed that that was just how things were.

As long as they did not take the other's side too readily, neither one of them fully controlled the conversation and they maintained their freedom.

Fleur had learned this from her mother. Her mother had taken her side, but had once taught her this: "Fleur, I am on your side. I will trust you no matter

what. But I will not see your enemies as my enemies.”

“Why not? Isn’t that weird?”

“Because once I make your enemies my enemies, we will be controlling each other.”

She had not understood at the time, but thinking back, it had always been like that.

She fought alongside her mother plenty of times, but her mother had obviously been forcing herself to do it.

And in the very end, her mother had protected her.

If her mother had made Fleur’s enemies her enemies, then she would have attacked instead.

She would have fought back.

Of course, that would have meant using up her power and vanishing.

But her mother had made her own decision, separate from Fleur’s will, and protected Fleur.

To the end, her mother had been on her side but not been controlled by her and acted independently.

That was the reason why. So...

“—————”

Just remembering that filled her with a tremor and anger, but she understood that her mother had done what she had thought was best. Fleur herself might have been the worst back there, but her mother had not been controlled by her.

According to Lisbeth, a servant normally took its master’s emotions into account, but...

“Fleur, you are still ranked too low. Do you understand? ...And you should think the same of me.”

That last part seems like what she really wanted to say, but I guess it doesn’t matter.

At any rate, she had come to understand her mother's stance while tending to the field in the reconstructed region. She could distance herself from the unpleasant things by staying busy and she had seen a certain meaning in that.

Before, she had felt perfectly happy just remaining by her mother's side, but she could now think back on their conversations as being quite meaningful.

And when she looked back at her memories like that, she regretted how little she had understood at the time and mourned the loss of her mother here now, but she was glad she at least had the option of reporting on these things in front of her mother's grave.

She had changed a lot.

She had a lot of thoughts on all this, but so much could remain the same because her mother had made sure everything was in order. If she had been controlled by her mother, she could not have been like this now.

As for the girl walking alongside her...

"What is it?"

The way she looked over reminded Fleur so much of herself.

The sister who often came up in the girl's stories was the opposite case from Fleur's mother.

That sister had apparently been a powerful enemy of the girl's desire to be an author. The girl had tried to get her sister to say she liked her stories, but she had gone too far and ended up getting into arguments.

But the girl seemed to understand that liking something was about personal preference, not objective logic.

Fleur found it interesting how the stories the girl told had the mysterious skill to make her say "Really!?" She often came across it in manga and dramas, but she could now tell that the mechanism really did exist.

She did not understand it quite enough to say "I see", but she was pretty sure the girl was right about her and her sister not quite being on the same page.

Her sister had her preferences and her sister could explain what those were, but when the girl heard that, she felt like she was being rejected.

But that was not it.

Her sister was merely *explaining* that she liked things her way, so she could not quite see what was so great about one particular aspect and she found some other aspect more appealing.

...Yeah.

The girl wanted to overturn that in her own way, so she likely wanted her sister to fully face her.

And she seemed to have realized that about herself.

“It’s exhausting.”

“Oh, yeah. Knowing that only makes the hurdle taller, doesn’t it?”

“That’s right,” said the girl. “I mean, I need to think about what my sister meant when she would talk about the way she likes things.”

“Isn’t that simple? ...After she gave the reasons for her critique, she didn’t tell you to change your story to match, right?”

“You mean...?”

Fleur’s mother had not been controlled by Fleur to the very end.

And Fleur had not been controlled by her mother.

So when her mother had vanished, it had been of her mother’s free will. So...

“She was telling you to do whatever you wanted. And to do it in a way that she and everyone else could understand.”

I see, thought Fleur.

When she saw the girl’s look of surprise, she trusted that she had said the right thing.

Back then, her mother had seen her off while remaining herself as much as possible.

That way Fleur could be with others while remaining free.

This was the same.

So Fleur said more.

“I hope you can make something that can be enjoyed by not just your sister but everyone else – like me – as well. When you do, I’ll show it off to my mama. And to everyone else too.”

“Oh, um, sure...”

The girl looked sort of pale when she faced Fleur.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, um...”

The girl had been trembling a bit for a while now, but now she took a deep breath.

“I’m not so sure.”

“About what?”

The girl responded with a lowered-eyebrows smile.

“Can I really catch up to what I created?”

“Eh?”

Fleur did not understand what that meant. But just from the sound of it...

“That was kind of cool!”

“R-really?”

“Yeah!”

After a pause, the girl gave a thumbs up.

“Yes, yes,” said Fleur to show her approval. The girl then chose the right path at a fork in the road. The path to the left looked brighter, but...

“Oh, if you’re going to that family restaurant, this way’s faster. ...This should take us there.”

It did not. “Huhhh?” said the girl with a tilt of her head. Fleur patted her on the shoulder and they laughed together as they walked back the way they had come.

As they did, a sudden voice spoke up.

“You are getting carried away.”

It came from the girl’s handbag. Fleur was a little surprised, but then she remembered the girl was a witch.

“Your servant?”

“Oh, yes. That’s right,” she answered with a tone of resignation but a definite smile. “It’s named Amaze.”

Hunter was more interested in Fleur’s whereabouts than the fries.

She was pretty sure the other girl could make it on her own since they were the same age, but she also wanted to avoid not noticing when she arrived.

...I really can’t see outside the window...

She had learned over the past few days just how dark it got outside, but it was more of a problem today. But she could not use a night vision spell inside the bright restaurant, so she asked a question of Horinouchi who sat across the table from her.

“Horinouchi, can I use an infrared night vision spell?”

“Going the see-through route, Hunter!?” asked Kagami.

“What are you two planning!?” protested Horinouchi.

“Don’t react to middle school level knowledge,” complained Hunter.

That got annoying fast.

So she instead opened a communication spell circle and contacted the 7th Fleet.

“Oh, hello? I can use GPS, so can you cast some ether detection from overhead on an anti-personnel level? There’s a geosynchronous satellite up there right now, isn’t there?”

“Did you hear that, Song Café!? Hunter’s target is an individual! What has

come over that girl!? Is it a rival in love!? Or a guy who rejected her!? Does it even matter!?”

“Don’t open the firing tube without my authorization!!”

I hope this doesn’t end badly, thought Hunter, but she was fairly certain Song Café would help keep things under control. If Song Café was not there at the moment...oh, well.

At any rate, the GPS spell circle she held displayed the surrounding area as viewed from the sky. It was a real time view that updated every 3 seconds. The resolution was 5cm per pixel. Since the disturbance of the air was removed, it was quite well done and a person was displayed with about 6-9 pixels.

It was dark, but by increasing the brightness and reducing the color saturation, the streetlights and lights from homes stood out. She could see the streets quite clearly.

She also saw the people walking there. Due to the ether detection placed over the image, the people emitted light.

The ether light seen through the family restaurant’s roof was brightest for Mary, followed by Horinouchi and then Hunter. She tapped the screen to check on each of them.

Kagami was unable to carry ether with her, so nothing was visible for her. Also...

...Is this her?

An especially large ether reading was walking from the station along the main road they had seen earlier.

It was Fleur. She was apparently not using spells for her rehabilitation, and that may have been why her ether was only partially leaking out.

At any rate, Hunter had located her.

“Have you located Fleur, Rank 3?” asked Mary who sat next to her.

“Yes, she’s on her way here. She should arrive in about 3 minutes, I think.”

Hunter breathed a sigh of relief. “But it would probably be best if we went out to meet her when she arrives. ...After all, she’s *coming alone*, so she might not know this is the right place.”

Fleur realized the girl’s pace was gradually growing lighter.

...Does she like family restaurants?

The girl had said she often went to this one. She had used it to rest when she was feeling unwell and she had mentioned her sister as usual.

It seemed to be an important place to her.

But Fleur did have a question: The girl had said nothing about meeting someone there, so why was her pace growing lighter?

A word familiar to Fleur suddenly came to mind.

...A grave?

That was where no one was waiting for you and yet someone was still waiting for you.

Of course, a family restaurant was not a graveyard. Then was it a prominent location from her memories where she went to think about things and report on her current self, just like Fleur did when she visited her mother’s grave?

Fleur had someone waiting for her.

Did that make her fortunate when compared to this girl? And while she thought about that...

“Ah, wait, wait.”

“Eh?”

The girl must not have noticed her pace had gotten so quick. She briefly looked shocked but then smiled and looked back toward Fleur.

“...Oh, sorry. I was feeling kind of impatient.”

“For someone who claims to fall ill easily, you sure are energetic.”

“That might be thanks to Amaze.”

"They do say illness starts from the mind," said the handbag.

"That's true," agreed Fleur. And, "Want to join us inside?"

The girl thought for a bit as they walked below a streetlight. And finally...

"Hmm, no thanks. I'll stay on my own."

"I see."

Fleur nodded and felt no regret. The girl must have been prioritizing her own memories. Probably memories of her sister.

Fleur just had to wait until they left to think about what to do.

"We'll probably be making a lot of noise, so if you change your mind, feel free to join us."

"Thanks."

"Don't worry about it."

Fleur waved a hand dismissively as they approached the light shining from the family restaurant.

And then the girl spoke quietly.

"I wonder if people like you will be able to stop me."

"...? From doing what?"

"When I try to do something bad."

"Isn't that for your sister to do?"

"Most likely, my sister is to me what your mama was to you. And..."

And...

"If I can't stop myself, I'll never be able to stop relying on my sister."

...Hm?

Something seemed off about that. Fleur thought about what it was, and...

"The only options for stopping you are *us* or *you alone*?"

"Eh?"

The girl did not seem to understand what that meant. She laughed as they both entered the light.

“That’s right. Thank you, Fleur.”

As she said that, the family restaurant door opened from the inside. Fleur assumed it would be some customers leaving, but it turned out to be the group she was meeting there.

...Oh, they’re all there.

Fleur was still with the girl, so she decided it would be best to introduce her.

And when the girl looked straight ahead instead of at Fleur...

“Um, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want, but what is your name?”

As soon as she asked that...

“...Shouko?”

The answer came from straight ahead.

From Kagami.

Everyone looked back at her as she froze in place with the restaurant’s light shining from behind her.

Chapter 6: Parting and Meeting

Chapter 6

"Parting and Meeting"



The silence of someone close to you
Feels more distant than the greeting of a stranger

The silence of someone close to you

Feels more distant than the greeting of a stranger

The girl stopped moving.

Nothing stopped her. She simply lost all strength when she saw who stood before her.

...Why?

She was unsure if that word was a question, an expression of anger, or a warning to herself.

A familiar face stood in the entrance space at the top of the short stairway to the family restaurant's entrance.

Her hair was white now. That stood out a lot, but this was no stranger.

It was her sister.

It was Kagami Kagami.

The girl had once reached a hand out to her after noticing her fighting the shrine maiden witch who now stood next to her. The girl had prepared for Hexennacht while doing her very best to ignore her sister, but...

...She's here too.

That kind of made the girl happy, but did that mean she was too soft?

After all, she knew what her sister was trying to do to her here.

Her sister had become a character in the worlds the girl had created.

And the girl had destroyed many of those worlds.

The residents of those worlds would never be able to accept that. The characters lost everything. The girl had done that time and again and her sister had been on the receiving end time and again. So...

“—————”

She would be scolded, accused, and stopped.

Her sister would probably use the same method she did or the methods of this world.

From the characters' viewpoints, killing her would be justified. She had done more than enough to deserve it. But...

...But...

After descending into this world, she had started to think that her sister might not be her enemy.

After speaking with the character named Fleur, she had realized it all came down to your point of view.

That was why she had wanted to do some thinking in a location from her

memories.

So her sister's presence here led to another thought:

...Was she thinking the same thing I was?

But that was not the case.

"Those are Shihouin Academy's top Rankers."

Amaze's words seemed to wake her up.

"That's right."

Shihouin Academy was holding a witch ranking competition in order to defeat the Black Witch.

The people around her sister were those Rankers. The shrine maiden she had seen her sister fighting was also there. In that case...

"They're friends."

Those words escaped her lips.

"Shouko, calm down," said Amaze.

She was calm. She understood exactly what this situation meant.

Her sister was meeting with friends to prepare to defeat the girl.

And she had brought other people to this location from their memories.

...That's right.

This was unavoidable. She had done enough to deserve it, so it was unavoidable.

But...

"I don't have to go along with that, do I?"

She did not think her sister was right. Nor did she think this was unavoidable.

If she was not controlled by her sister, she could say this:

"How could you...!?"

It doesn't matter if no one else sees it the same way. My enemy doesn't have to be anyone else's enemy. So...

“...Shouko!”

That familiar voice pierced her chest.

No, she thought as her movements came to a stop. And then her sister said more as if to drive the point home.

“Don't decide this on your own!”

Kagami saw a certain movement.

Her sister looked her in the eye.

The light coming from behind Kagami reflected off the tears in her sister's eyes.

“You're late. And yet you keep getting ahead of me and doing everything better than me.”

...This is not good.

Kagami quickly moved forward. She had to run over to her sister and say something to her. But...

“You wouldn't understand. So...”

The next thing she knew, a power had hit her.

A black blade pierced the center of her chest.

...Is this...?

It looked a lot like Dikaiosyne, but it was black and thin.

It was too complex to have been constructed in an instant. It had suddenly appeared and Kagami's own momentum had propelled her body into it.

So this is a power of creation greater than my own, she rationally analyzed while her sister's form changed before her eyes.

“The Black Witch...!?” exclaimed Horinouchi

That was exactly who stood there now.

It was likely a Magino Frame. Kagami's sister wore a black Queen-style Form.

"Stay out of this fight, Kagami."

With that, her sister casually pulled the sword from Kagami's chest.

The alarm sounded. And it had jumped straight to Level 5. That alert authorized any final decision.

Despite the suddenness of the sound and the many spell circles that appeared in quick succession, Lisbeth reacted immediately.

This was not her first time experiencing this. She had remembered this and constantly prepared herself for it times, so she opened a spell circle like she was making a counterattack.

"The Black Witch has appeared! All hands, once you confirm her location, you may fire at will!"

As soon as she barked that order, black light welled up from the northwest horizon.

...Over there...!?

The ether detection spell circle by her hands displayed a great mass of ether in the Shinagawa region. She did not even need to confirm what it was. She activated a control override on the airborne Magino Devices waiting on standby. She used the ether detection spell in place of a targeting spell, and...

"Fire...!"

Light raced above the ocean and through the sky.

A cage of gunblade Devices surrounded Shihouin Academy in the sky. The 21 that formed the western curve quickly fired on a single spot.

They were all fired in emergency mode, so they did not perform any recoil reduction.

Unable to eliminate the momentum of their attack, the blades slid, rotated, and dropped down through the sky above Shihouin Academy. But the 21 shots they fired flew accurately toward the coast of the mainland.

“That isn’t enough power! Prepare a second blast!”

Two motions followed that shout from the witch commanding the west end of the cage.

The first was the gunblades surrounding Shihouin Academy’s eastern side entering sniper mode.

There were 37 of them. From their vertical orientation, they rotated 270 degrees, sending their blade tip slicing through the wind before pointing to the west of Tokyo Bay. Targeting spells opened as their ether-gathering engine system fully opened to increase the density of the blast. Then a high-pitched roar sounded while several strengthening spells appeared in the cannon’s internal acceleration system to increase the power. But...

“The enemy is appearing!!”

The range-finding witch making observations for the sniper shots announced the second motion.

Black light swirled around at one point to the west of Tokyo Bay. The 21 shots of light approached it, and...

“That’s a direct hit!”

That shout reached them all just as light exploded on the coast of the mainland.

It was a hit. They were all convinced of that when something unexpected happened.

It was not a hit.

“You did it, didn’t you!?”

Lisbeth could see the 21 cannon lines fired from high in the night sky, but she did not bother following them as she spoke.

At first glance, it looked like they had been hit back, but that was not the case.

“Did you make it so they didn’t hit!?”

She understood *what* had happened more than *how*.

The cannon blasts had definitely been on course for a direct hit. They did not know what was there, but the attacks had been set to track that ether output. It should have been an automatic bull’s eye.

There were 2 possible reasons why they did not hit.

1: They had been dodged.

2: They had been blocked.

But they were up against the Black Witch here. There was a 3rd option that she alone could choose. In other words...

“3: They simply ‘didn’t hit’.”

That witch held the same power that had created this world. She could rewrite the laws around her as she saw fit, so she could make an attack “not hit”. Or from their perspective...

...Our attack power wasn’t enough to match the Black Witch’s imagination!

Simply put, she could grasp and rewrite anything within her imagination. Imagination formed the foundation of creation. And the only ones who could surpass the Black Witch’s imagination were the top Rankers in Shinagawa and their Magino Devices which had had their sniping power increased to the limit. But...

“...Kh.”

Exactly what she had received a report on existed there now.

Since the concentrated cannon fire had not hit, something stood up from the storm of black ether light.

...Is that...?

She had never seen it before, but she knew what it was. Of course she did. Just the other day, her memories had been overwritten with the proper information, resurrecting the knowledge within her.

She knew what was standing up from Shinagawa. She remembered it.

“The Geo Frame!?”

No. The other day, she had seen a white and vermilion Geo Frame. That had been the holy knight standing over 3km tall which Horinouchi and Kagami had created.

That was not what she saw now.

It was a black queen. It stood over 3km tall and it wielded a skinny sword much like Dikaio syne.

“Did the Black Witch summon her own Geo Frame!?”

Oh, no, thought Lisbeth, feeling like she had screwed up.

This was not a feeling that this was bad, dangerous, or frightening.

She was worried that the great form standing before her eyes would lead to every single negative result imaginable. With Hexennacht approaching, they had been pouring all of their strength into defeating the Black Witch, but...

...What if it wasn't enough?

She had thought they could win if they tried. She had decided that meant they needed to try. So she had chosen what they needed to do, saw the Ranker battles through to their proper end, and improved their equipment and techniques. Everyone else had been working in their own way to wipe clean their previous failure.

But what if the Black Witch was the same?

The Geo Frame was the lost technique that they had finally regained after doing what they needed to. The Black Witch had hidden it from them and kept them from seeing it.

It was not that she had never considered the possibility of the Black Witch using it.

She had considered every possibility. But...

...She's using it here!?



The Black Witch should have been sealed within the moon.

Why was she here?

It made no sense.

But she was here. She should not have been, but she was. Which meant...

...She must have had some way.

That was not so strange.

It only meant she had used some unknown method to overturn their assumptions and betray their expectations.

It was not that they had failed to give it enough thought.

They had thought about it wrong. And that was why Lisbeth thought “oh, no”. Also...

“Report!”

Now that Lisbeth could see the Black Witch standing up, she made her next move. The alert was already at Level 5, so she could do anything she had to.

“Ma’am!”

One of her witch subordinates’ voices rang out. The wind from the Magino Devices finally arrived at Shihouin Academy and blew through in multiple layers.

That witch wind of late October rustled the dried leaves of the trees.

“A 2nd powerful reading has appeared in Shinagawa!”

Lisbeth could see it. The massive vortex of light was white this time. Unlike with the Black Witch, this power expanded in a first and second phase.

“Is that Horinouchi and Kagami’s Geo Frame!?”

Horinouchi thought she should stop Kagami.

...This is reckless!

The other girl was summoning her holy knight Magino Frame. She had fallen to her knees, her shoulders rose and fell, and she coughed a dark red substance

onto the chest stage forming the Geo Frame's control floor.

That substance was blood.

"Kagami!"

Horinouchi did have healing spells. But because Ranker Battles were generally 1-on-1, she had not learned many healing spells for use on others. Besides, Kagami had healing spells of her own.

"I am fine, Horinouchi."

Kagami stood up, lifting her hips first. A spell circle appeared on her back and in front of her chest. That stopped the bleeding for now, but she was far from "fine". However...

"Horinouchi!"

What mattered most now? Kagami called her name to point that out and Horinouchi realized they had no time.

So she stepped up next to Kagami.

"Let's do this!"

Hearing that, Kagami's looked at her in surprise. But soon...

"Well done, Horinouchi!"

Horinouchi was not going to agree with that. She had only made the obvious decision. They were "buddies" in order to defeat the Black Witch, but...

...Is the battle beginning now!?

She had wanted to learn more about the Black Witch.

And when the Black Witch had seen them, she had looked to Kagami and Horinouchi and then cried.

...Why?

But at the very least, Kagami and her sister had had a falling out. Something had happened with the sister. This only increased Horinouchi's desire to learn what that was, but reality demanded she act now.

They had to get through this here and now. So she took Kagami's hand and

had the Geo Frame prepare for battle.

“Straight ahead!”

“No!!”

Just as they sent an attack forward, Hunter’s voice and a multi-layer blow arrived from overhead.

Several beams of light fell from the heavens above the Geo Frame’s head.

The 21 initial shots fired from Shihouin Academy had been deflected by the Black Witch, but now...

...They curved back around!?

Lisbeth saw the 21 lights descend upon their curved paths.

...Is this...?

It reminded her of something.

Something much like this had happened 10 years ago.

After simply blocking Mitsuyo’s attacks, the Black Witch had suddenly bent the attack in a way that broke all the rules.

That had been the turning point in the battle. But...

“Hunter!”

A shield opened directly below the 21 descending shots.

The 500m shield was Hunter’s Hedgehog.

17 shots scored direct hits. The other 4 passed down through it and hit the Geo Frame, but they only hit the armor on the outside of the shoulders or legs.

The half-destroyed Hedgehog wobbled unsteadily in the sky, but the Geo Frame below was nearly unharmed. And so Lisbeth raised her voice.

“Up above you!!”

Mary realized she had been late to react.

She knew their enemy was there, but she was still on the ground, and...

...Brigadier General! Miss Horinouchi!

Since they had arrived in Shinagawa, hadn't they wanted to learn more about the Black Witch? And hadn't they not wanted the Black Witch to end up the way they had?

Mary felt it was not her place since her world had been destroyed and she had tried to annihilate Kagami, but she could not help but feel a certain concern for the two who faced their enemy now.

...Are you sure this is what you want!?

That was not a question she should be asking now that it was all in motion.

And those two would have already overcome this thought.

Now was the time for action. After all...

"The Black Witch...!"

She was up above. The 21 shots she had twisted around had destroyed Hunter. And from further above...

...What are those?

Even from the surface, Mary noticed them.

Giant, round silhouettes were visible through the explosion of light. There were two of them and they were both more than 200m long.

"It's the Black Witch's reinforcements! It's her minions!"

When she heard Lisbeth's voice, Mary reflexively drew Ira from empty air.

...Make it in time!

Hunter's Hedgehog had been destroyed. The Rank 3 had evacuated into the air and she gave a clear nod after seeing Mary on the surface.

She was not saying "you handle this". She was saying "do it". So Mary unleashed her power.

She could see the enemy.

One was a dragon that seemed to be created by connecting spheres together.

The other was a giant with a headless body, a single eye, and short arms and legs. They both looked like scribbled drawings, but...

“...!”

Mary split them apart along with the half-destroyed Hedgehog.

The giant Magino Device was torn into three and the attack continued past it.

Immediately afterwards, the two minions were split by her annihilation spell and turned to light.

...They explode!?

That was right. There were holes from giant explosions across Japan and the rest of the world. What had caused those?

“Do these minions explode!?”

She briefly thought that defeating them had been a mistake, but that was not it. They were meant to move along the surface and explode when they were damaged or some other condition was met.

An explosion on the surface would cause massive damage.

Destroying them in the sky was the correct thing to do. But...

“Brigadier General...!”

Everything stopped.

The explosion erupted in the sky, the shockwave shattered the surrounding glass on the surface, and it shook the roofs of the buildings. It felt like a light earthquake, but...

...The ley line facilities will adjust for it!

The ley line stabilizers installed primarily at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples would absorb that damage through the ley lines. A few of the stabilizers would likely blow, but that was what they were for. So there was no need to hold back.

“Attack...!”

She looked up, but the Geo Frame was not moving.

...Huh?

Earlier, she was fairly certain the Geo Frame had raised its giant sword and swung it forward.

But the giant, vermilion and white female knight had frozen in its attack pose. It did not move.

No, it was moving.

The movement came from the Geo Frame's giant sword which was extended forward from Mary's perspective.

The extra-large vermilion and white Dikaiosyne exploded.

What had happened?

“—————!?”

Mary saw a long black blade jutting out from the vermilion and white Geo Frame's back.

The Black Witch's sword had pierced straight through Dikaiosyne.

...It's the same...!?

Lisbeth once more saw the same thing happen as 10 years ago.

It had been the same back then.

Mitsuyo had managed to defend against her own attack when the Black Witch had ignored the world's laws and bent it. She had used an attack from her Geo Frame's bow to counteract it.

And that was when the Black Witch had called in her “reinforcements”.

It had been more like the minions suddenly appeared than were summoned and none had appeared inside the barrier. Mitsuyo had made a preemptive attack on them because she had predicted what damage they would cause.

Sensing future danger was not a bad thing.

But imagining something else on the battlefield had created an opening.

The Black Witch had taken full advantage of that.

At the time, the Black Witch had not had anything rivalling the Geo Frame and her sword had pierced Mitsuyo's Geo Frame.

It was the same now.

It would not have been so bad if only the cannon fire had fallen from overhead.

But the Black Witch's minions had appeared out of nowhere. Mary had dealt with them, but thinking about what to do about the subsequent explosions and thinking about 10 years ago had created an opening.

Lisbeth was honestly impressed that the Geo Frame had managed to get in an attack.

...But I guess their attack couldn't reach her thanks to that opening!

Reality stood before her eyes.

The Black Witch's giant Frame had used its Device to pierce both the Geo Frame's sword and the Geo Frame itself.

If the Black Witch had used only its Device sword as a weapon, things would have ended differently. A sword alone would have lost to the weight and momentum and it would have been the Black Witch who was defeated.

But that was not what had happened.

The black queen, which was equivalent to a Geo Frame, had "adjusted" to match the opening in her enemy's attack.

As a counterattack, she had taken a quick half step back and thrust her sword toward the Geo Frame's blade. The half step back had moved her entire body like a wave traveling up from below.

The rough attack had been stopped by the blade thrown with her full body behind it and the Queen-style Frame had crouched down to move in from below.

From there, the long blade had simply pierced through the giant Dikaiosyne and reached the Geo Frame itself.

They had been outdone.

Explosive pressure reached them from overhead. The light was split and two shockwaves burst.

“...!”

An incredible amount of ether light scattered in every direction.

All that remained was the enemy. The queenly silhouette remained while Kagami and Horinouchi’s Geo Frame was destroyed.

Horinouchi cried out within the explosive blast and light.

“—————!”

She had no idea what she had shouted. But by the time their Geo Frame had been pierced and Dikaiosyne had burst and shattered, Kagami had collapsed forward.

When Horinouchi supported her, she felt something with her right hand, which was bared to draw her bowstring.

It was a somewhat sticky liquid that carried Kagami’s body heat.

It was blood.

“Kagami...!”

“That would be goodbye. ...Now stay out of this fight, Kagami,” said a voice. “This is my Satanic Frame. It’s only a makeshift creation, but it came in handy.”

As the light scattered, the chest stage on which they stood also shattered and fell.

The black Queen-style Frame was visible in front of them.

...The Satanic Frame!?

The Black Witch must have created it to compete against the Geo Frame.

But her words belatedly rang within Horinouchi’s ears.

...Stay out of this fight...?

She questioned that as everything shattered and fell. She held Kagami in her arms, but the girl only felt like a warm weight.

“Kagami...!”

Every healing spell she had activated automatically. Would the healing spells meant for her affect Kagami if she held her close like this?

Her eyes looked to the black Satanic Frame visible in the sky beyond the light. It moved.

“Listen up, my creations. ...We will settle this tomorrow.”

That meant moving Hexennacht up by a day. And more importantly...

...Kagami!

With a wound this bad, there was no way Kagami would be able to fight by the next day. Despite that, the Black Witch flew through the sky.

Light scattered, a black wind whipped up, and she vanished into the moonlight in the blink of an eye.

Horinouchi could only look up and feel the resilience of the person in her arms.

“Someone...!”

Even if she did everything she was supposed to, she was still worried.

The stage was shattering and falling, but she replaced even her fall control spells with healing spells.

“Someone!”

It did not matter who. She wanted help from anyone other than herself.

“Someone please help her!!”

Chapter 7: What Do You Think?

Chapter 7

“What Do You Think?”



I thought I was going to
Make some kind of gag
But unwanted memories replayed one after another

I thought I was going to

Make some kind of gag

But unwanted memories replayed one after another

Shouko woke up. She felt like she was peeling herself up from the sticky weariness.

She was only opening her eyes, but it felt like lifting her entire body. As for why...

...My room.

She felt like she had been elsewhere a moment before. In fact, she really had been.

“Nn...”

She sat up, looked around, and saw a book by the pillow.

It had a black leather cover and decorations in gold thread.

“Amaze.”

“My, you sure slept soundly, Shouko.”

She probably had. She could definitely sense the feedback reaching her body.

...It's been a while since I materialized one of my dreams.

“What was that? It feels like I dreamed about meeting and arguing with my sister.”

“That was the truth in one of the world, Shouko.”

“You always say such confusing things, Amaze.”

She lay back down and looked out the window where she saw the earth.

A bit above horizontal, the blue planet floated at an angle that placed Japan in the center. The view out the window showed a wasteland of rocks and black shadows leading out to the earth which floated in the black background.

“Being on the moon isn't that much of an issue when I'm inside my home.”

“That’s because you’ve spent so much time asleep. And more importantly,” continued Amaze. “Shouko, will you create a new world’s story?”

Shouko had heard Amaze’s invitation countless times before.

“I am incredibly thankful and happy that your imagination is always changing its technique and quality while always creating an ending.”

“Really?”

“Really. ...Techniques are developed and create derivations, but the old ones will end. You are quite fascinating because you carry that out at the level of entire worlds. After all, that means you are approving of me in my entirety.”

“Maybe so, but I’m not really aware of doing any of that.”

She began working her mind as she said that.

She gradually recalled what she had thought and done a moment ago on the earth in that materialized dream.

...*Wow.*

She had caused a lot of trouble for that girl named Fleur.

She was unsure if she could say the same about her sister. Or was that just her being stubborn?

“I can’t believe this...”

She leaned her upper body down toward the blanket. It felt surprisingly cool on her forehead.

...*But my mood kept shifting up and down because it was a “dream”.*

It was all reliant on the dream, but with Hexennacht approaching, she had suddenly dreamed of that region where her home had once been.

It also may have had to do with knowing her sister was there. So she had tried materializing her dream, but...

“I went too far. ...I was even conceited enough to think I was changing.”

Even if it was a “dream” for her, it was reality for her sister. And for everyone

else there.

She was not ignorant of what she had done to the many worlds she had crushed in the past. Nor was she ignorant of how her sister saw her after being caught in that destruction as a character.

...I really don't want her to scold me.

But despite thinking that, she still destroyed the worlds.

Because she knew she had created them poorly, so they would eventually fall out of balance and collapse on their own. A large part of that had to do with the way she created stories. Because of her chronic disease, her tendency to stay home, and the pressure she felt from her sister, the worlds she created were always twisted in some way.

Amaze would praise the worlds she made, but that was always about the world's techniques and the various aspects of the setting, not because of the twisted part.

At first, she had not wanted to destroy them.

But that had not stopped it. The worlds had collapsed on their own.

So at first, she had made her identity known and participated just like her sister was doing now. But once it had become clear that there was no stopping it, they had demanded she take responsibility.

They had asked her why.

But there was nothing she could have done. Those worlds had been doomed to that fate from the moment they had been made. The small distortion that had slipped past her notice would ultimately make an appearance far after the story she wanted to tell had ended.

She had created those worlds because she wanted to tell a story, so she had not thought about what would happen afterwards.

But they had all blamed her. They had insisted she take responsibility.

They're probably right, she had thought. I made it, so of course they'll say that.

It came down to the limits of her imagination.

But after several of the worlds had broken, she had made up her mind: she would take responsibility.

“If a world is going to break, then I will destroy it as its creator.”

She had made up her mind and acted on that conviction.

As she did, she had realized something.

When she acted as a world’s enemy, its residents would resist her. She had created them. She had thought up a story for them and she had cried, laughed, and felt anger about them, but they had all sent their anger and resentment her way.

To be honest, that was hard to bear, but she could not blame them either. It was her fault for her insufficient imagination.

She had made the same excuse over and over again:

“If you can stop me, then your world will not be destroyed. So do your best.”

And so she had destroyed those worlds.

She thought it was her fault that the worlds would break down and die. So she wanted the residents to do their best. Their very, very best. She wished she could create a world that would not be destroyed, but she also hoped the residents would do their best. However...

...*Why?*

A few signs had informed her that her sister was pursuing her.

A few times they had just missed each other as she left the world and her sister entered it. But...

...*Why here?*

“Shouko.”

“Oh, right.”

That vague response was not a confirmation or denial and it seemed something like both.

“This is unusual,” said Amaze. “No, this is how you were when we had just met. Should I continue on as I am?”

“Please don’t be too strict. And as for me...it seems I still *haven’t changed*.
...*I can’t believe this*.

With that thought, she got up. She always felt kind of refreshed when she got up, but she would feel terribly worn out just a few minutes later.

“Amaze.”

“What is it?”

“Am I doing this right?”

“You...well, according to my standards, you are. You create things and you end them. Nothing could be better for a responsible creator.”

“Nothing could be better, hm?”

“Indeed. ...Although I doubt my creators ever thought I would be used for a girl’s entertainment.”

“And I never thought there would be a world where people lived on the moon because you get magic power from moonlight. But...”

“But what, Shouko?”

“Can you tell me about yourself again, Amaze?”

She badgered the book to talk about itself.

Whenever it complied, the story was fairly ridiculous, but she kind of understood some of it. After all...

“Tell me about the people who made you.”

It helped relax her to hear that there had been people like her in the past.

“Which era should I talk about?”

“I know it was from a time when years and calendars don’t apply, so don’t bother with that.”

“Then which region?”

“There were four floods, so nothing but latitude and longitude has any meaning, right? Compared to now, I mean.”

“Then as an introductory remark...”

“Amaze, you’re a terrible singer.”

“You love to cut out everything necessary for a proper ritual, don’t you!?”

“You can stick all that stuff at the end. C’mon, get on with it.”

“Well,” said the book as Shouko thought to herself.

...There was an old spy movie where a recording medium disguised as a book gave people verbal instructions, wasn’t there?

“Amaze, you aren’t going to shoot out smoke and burn away afterwards, are you?”

“You’re expecting some weird things from me, aren’t you?”

The book grew cautious, but it also began talking.

“Let’s go with an older period than usual. Before the events in this world.”

“Before the 3rd person?”

“Yes. This is back when I was created.”

“...You remember that?”

“Well, yes. Besides, I didn’t have this form originally.”

She remembered hearing a bit about this before.

“You were a collection of thin slates, right?”

“Right. I was originally a holder that contained the magic power of your world. But that magic power interfered with itself and produced my consciousness.”

“You were a bug?”

“No, I was probably made to do that. After all, my will thinks in human terms and I prioritize being read by someone. Also...”

“Also?”

“My creator respected me, but I do in fact know who it was that made me.”

Shouko had a feeling this was the first time Amaze had shown any emotion toward its creator.

She considered asking about it, but Amaze did not seem aware of it.

So she decided against it.

Instead, she asked about something else she had noticed.

“What were you created to do when you had that form? Were you just a storehouse for power?”

“I was originally made to respond to someone’s will and, if possible, create whatever it was that person imagined.”

“So you were an all-powerful creation device?”

“That’s a tad blunt, but I suppose so. Of course, it had to be someone with a will capable of communicating with me, which was apparently rare. But in my case, I could use my knowledge to supplement the imagination of the will communicating with me.”

“So like an AI supporter.”

“Exactly. ...Now, you know how there are discussions about where the wheel or steel were first invented, right? I helped in the creation of such things.”

“...Now you’re just bragging.”

“No, no, no. It’s true. To create those, someone had to first wish for a technology to carry things more efficiently or a material sturdier than wood or dirt, right? I wasn’t the right answer myself, but I could help reach the answer and actually produce it for them once they settled on the answer.”

“What if what you made wasn’t the same thing the user wanted?”

“The user can only imagine something fairly vague, so as long as it functions properly, I don’t see how there could be a problem.”

“Ahhh... But there are things better than wheels and better than steel, so I feel bad for the civilizations that drew the short straw there.”

“You can be rather harsh, you know that!? But anyway,” continued Amaze. “I was created to assist in people’s development like that. The power in our world was thin, so I concentrated it together to guarantee it could be used for creation.”

“And how did you end up at our house?”

“People were no longer able to communicate with me.”

“You’re speaking with me. And weren’t you given a will of your own to make communication easier?”

“Have you forgotten that your family couldn’t communicate with me?”

Now that Amaze mentioned it, that was true.

“I hope I haven’t gone insane and I’m just sitting here talking to a book.”

“Do you really think I would confirm that even if it was true?”

This book has a point... she thought, but then Amaze sighed and asked a question.

“Once people begin to doubt that god even exists, they start looking at themselves. They want to have a logical explanation for why they came to be. Because they assumed they had originally been created by someone.”

So...

“I was glad I could communicate with you, Shouko.”

“Yeah, you say that.”

“It’s true,” said Amaze in a shrugging tone. But if what the book said was to be believed, it had not spoken with anyone for at least several hundred years.

...I wouldn’t be able to stand that.

She did not want to imagine her life coming to an end while everyone ignored her.

“Your imagination is incredible,” said Amaze. “There is no greed for money or fame. You simply construct worlds. You can imagine good, evil, and everything in between. That is your talent.”

“I have a feeling that’s not quite a compliment, but I do sometimes wonder something.”

She had wondered it in the past and in the earlier “dream”.

“Even if the worlds are fictional...is it really okay to destroy them?”

“It is.” The response was carefree. “I mean, you imagined them. They might have been created, but they are essentially fictional. You only have one reality. You cannot let your worries about the product of your imagination affect the imagination needed to create something.”

Shouko thought Amaze was right.

At the same time, they both knew it was only a slight difference.

“But, Shouko? You see more than just functionality and invention within the fictional things your imagination creates, don’t you? You also see value in them, don’t you?”

Amaze’s tone grew more mature when it was thinking more rapidly. And at times like that, Amaze became an innocent being that valued creation. So Shouko...

“If anything, when you’re writing a novel, the background world exists to establish the characters’ techniques and lifestyles, so what matters most is the characters’ story created from that.”

“Is it like the difference between a playwright and a prop master?”

Shouko was not sure. She did not have any direct experience with plays.

“But when my sister heard my stories, she would laugh and cry.”

“Well...”

“It’s weird, isn’t it? It’s in our imaginations, it’s fictional, and it’s all fake, so why do we laugh and cry?”

She called out Amaze’s name.

“What we’re doing might be wrong and I might be realizing how to do the right thing.”

“But when you tried to do that, you ultimately chose to take responsibility. ... If there is a better means of doing something about the worlds you have created, then I will assist you. But you will end what you have created. And I will help with that. Do not think in terms of right and wrong; think in terms of can and can’t.”

She had no response to that. And...

“When I think about it, Amaze, I’m controlling you, aren’t I?”

“Yes. I caught a glimpse of this in your ‘dream’, but if you are drunk on my power, then that would mean you are controlling me.”

“Am I drunk?”

“You used to be. ...You know, like when you wrote that one about Robins, the handsome brother of the king, and Maris, princess of Crystal Grande, meeting and fighting back against the king: ‘Maris! I missed you! I was willing to cross a billion nights to see you!’ ”

“Ahhhhhhh! You didn’t have to mention that!!”

“Just to be clear, of the worlds you materialized, you were drunk on my power during at least the first 70 or so.”

“What about now?”

“For the 2000 or so after that, I suppose you were sober even after materializing them.”

I’ve made that many? she thought. *But I’ve still got a ways to go to reach 3000 worlds,* she also thought.

“However,” said Amaze. “When you were trying to keep the worlds from being destroyed, you noticed I could never do anything more than you asked of me, didn’t you? I can mix together and mash up your imagination, but I am a Book of Creation that cannot create anything from nothing.”

“Then the real question is why I materialized those worlds in the first place.”

“You have done nothing wrong, Shouko. You have simply used and enjoyed your imagination.”

So...

“Once you decided you wanted to see whether or not your imagination was correct, you decided you wanted to view it as reality instead of fiction. ...And I complied. I thought your imagination was correct, so I created it. And the resultant worlds are beautifully complete worlds that are born, develop, and then vanish.”

“But...”

“But, Shouko, if you do not want to see your worlds disappear, then you should make even more worlds. Or-...”

“I know that,” she said, cutting off Amaze.

She looked to the planet visible outside the window and thought about what and who was there.

“If they are to stop us, they can’t let themselves be stopped by *us*. ...Perhaps this is the world that will accomplish that. But...”

But...

“If not, prepare for the next one, Amaze. ...I will erase this world and create the next.”

Chapter 8: Wishes Gather

Chapter 8

“Wishes Gather”



An ideology pours all its energy
Into an unclear result
Willpower pours in all its energy
Even after the result is clear

An ideology pours all its energy

Into an unclear result

Willpower pours in all its energy

Even after the result is clear

Fleur could tell she had been caught in the middle of something big.

The day before, she had been trying to meet up with Kagami's group, but she had apparently guided the Black Witch to them instead.

She had returned to Shihouin Academy to find something like a night-long party and she had spoken with Lisbeth in a tent in front of the main gate. However...

"So that's what happened..."

After Fleur explained everything, the woman had sighed and hung her head quite deeply.

Horinouchi, Hunter, and Mary had also been called in, so she had re-explained a lot.

Those three and Lisbeth had all asked for details about the Book of Creation that Shouko had. After comparing her information with what Kagami had told them, they concluded that it was all accurate. As long as Shouko had that, she could threaten this world using creation as a weapon.

But what were they going to do?

"As long as she and the book are in agreement, they can't be separated unless we defeat the Black Witch," said Horinouchi. "That means we have to surpass her imagination to make her give up on her imagination."

"So that's what your attack power is for..."

"Yes, that's gotta be what her attack power is for."

Horinouchi had glared at the other 2 Rankers, but Fleur was pretty sure they were right.

But while she was talking about Shouko the second time, she had said the following: “I think Shouko loves Kagami.”

That had caused Horinouchi’s eyebrows to rise, but then she had gulped and nodded.

“...Probably so.”

Fleur had expected her to insist the enemy could never feel that way, but she did not.

That was a relief. If Fleur saw Shouko on the battlefield, she was not sure what she would want to say, but as far as Hexennacht was concerned...

...That’s right.

She had her issue with her mother and she felt like Horinouchi and Kagami had taken Hexennacht from her. The best way to bear with how low that made her feel had been to remind herself that she had lost her mother and her power, but...

“...This is in your hands, Horinouchi.”

She now felt she could leave this to Horinouchi since that girl felt the same way about Shouko.

She was also worried about Kagami’s condition and, since things were going to get dangerous with Hexennacht moved up a day, she had considered returning to the dorm first thing in the morning. However...

“Fleur. We have a role for you.”

“Eh? Do I get to be an evacuee!? Wow! That sounds like fun!”

“Um, not quite.” Lisbeth snapped her fingers. “We have witches who specialize in drain spells. However, the process for drain spells is a bit of a pain and they are nearly useless for attacks. But on the battlefield, there will be plenty of witches who overused their spells and ran out of Blessings. ...Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“Wait.”

“Can we use drain spells on you to redistribute your excess Blessings to the

other witches?”

That meant...

“I’m a batteryyyyy!?”

More or less.

At any rate, Hexennacht was set to begin at 10 PM.

According to the spell circle clock, everything would begin in another 2 hours.

When is she going to wake up? wondered Horinouchi.

She stood in a white room. *Something a lot like this happened when we fought Hunter, didn’t it?* she thought, but this was much worse than that time.

She looked down at someone without even bothering to sit in the chair.

“...Kagami? They tell me you’re dreaming.”

Kagami lay in the bed while a few spell circles stabilized her condition.

She was alive.

She was fine. She had bandages wrapped around her in places, but below the blanket, the stab wound in the center of her body had completely vanished. According to the medically-advanced European U.A.H.’s medical division...

“Hell, yeah! We got it closed up! But should we put a strength-stone or something inside!? Or make something grow from her!? How about it!?”

They had gotten a little overexcited, but Koutarou had smoothed things over with his persuasion skills. One of them had been an acquaintance of a Horinouchi family witch, so the healing of Kagami and the exchange of information had been completed quickly.

Kagami was fine.

Her body was there and her injury had been healed.

But there was a problem.

“What are you dreaming about?”

She was dreaming.

Some kind of attack had influenced the ether forming her body and her mind, locking them both in a state of dreaming.

So even if they tried to harm her, no real weapon could do so.

An ether attack would be weakened, but it would still work well enough. So the only way to affect her through normal means would require equipment extracted “from a dream”.

Hunter had tilted her head when she heard that.

“If she’s basically invincible...does that mean we could break through anything if we fired Kagami as a shell?”

“Her body is still as soft as ever.”

“You touched her, Miss Horinouchi?”

Why did they have to glare at me for that?

At any rate, it had been an Eastern European witch that had detected this and she had claimed it was “a super powered-up version of the fairy tale situation where the princess was awakened by a kiss from the prince”.

“Super? Just how super are we talking about here?”

“Well...it’s just quite super is all. Yes.”

The doctor had avoided answering like that, but it seemed Kagami’s mind was active in her dream.

The final conclusion was that she would wake up once she was done dreaming.

“But you didn’t wake up. ...And Hexennacht is starting in 2 hours.”

Horinouchi stood by the window, spread the blinds with her fingers, and viewed southern Tokyo Bay.

She saw the bay and the coast as night fell.

This was the medical building on the south end of Shihouin Academy.

The view from the window showed several Magino Frames summoned above the bay and the moving beams of searchlights. The 7th Fleet and a JSDF fleet were arranged to form the barrier in the center of the bay. While European U.A.H.'s Magino Devices had been the only ones in the sky earlier, there were now some Devices from a group of volunteer witches.

And at the center of it all, something could be seen in the full moon which floated at the midpoint of the heavens.

It was a shadow.

No, it was not just one giant shadow. Countless tiny shadows surrounded the moon like a sandstorm.

"The Black Witch's minions. Her reinforcements."

It was a swarm of black dragons and black dolls.

As she looked at them, Horinouchi nodded and then looked to Kagami once more.

"Your dreaming must be a kindness from your sister. ...Even if this world is destroyed, it will not happen in your dream, so you will not be destroyed along with us and you can continue to the next world."

Meaning...

"The Black Witch must intend to defeat us and take you with her as she moves on."

...This really is complicated.

The older sister was a lot of trouble, but the younger sister seemed to be a handful as well. However...

"When you next wake up, Hexennacht will probably be over. Hopefully, we'll win. But if we don't...you will journey to yet another world."

So...

"Farewell, my precious guest. If possible..."

Once she said that, something caught her attention.

...Oh?

I was getting a little carried away with what I was saying, but was I about to say what I think I was?

She looked around to make sure there was no one else here. She could not detect anyone hiding using stealth. Dikaio had been standing on the side table, but it had tactfully hidden behind the flower vase.

...What a clever servant!

I'm glad it left. Or am I? Well, I suppose so. And after having the stage set so perfectly, it would be wrong of me not to play my part. So...

“—————”

When their lips met, her hair fell down on the right and she had to brush it back up with her hand. She felt that proved how inexperienced with this she was.

But after staying like that for a while...

“Nn.”

She moved away and felt a single teardrop fall from the corner of her eye.

“I'll be going. There is so much I want to say, but that will have to wait until this is over.”

It turned out a kiss would not wake Kagami.

Feeling a somewhat disappointed sense of relief, Horinouchi turned her back on the girl.

Kagami would be safe even if the world was destroyed. But Horinouchi had a job to do.

“I will stop your sister.”

It was 10 PM on the dot.

The seal to resist the Black Witch had been formed. The barrier spread out to envelop the ocean off the coast of Kanagawa and it was pointed toward the moon. Once their opponent's presence was confirmed, it would be linked to the barrier already surrounding the moon. That would bind the territories of the

two sides of the battle.

This time, the seal would not block ether. While inside that, Horinouchi would be able to receive a near limitless supply of ether.

A barrier-strengthening installation was linked to the shrines and temples around Japan. It appeared as a blossoming flower that enveloped Akerindou from below. And with the barrier as a focal point, all of the shrines and temples could install additional spells which would also increase the defenses of the surface. By ley line strengthening Japan, it would become a powered nation that would take only a third of the damage if they were hit by the same kind of attacks as 10 years ago.

And while that plan was put in place, there was movement in the air close to the surface.

European U.A.H.'s Magino Frame unit had increased to a total of 1500 thanks to an extra 500 sent in from Europe. They were flying around to protect the area around the barrier and to intercept attacks from the sky.

Next, the volunteer witches from Shihouin Academy and other U.A.H. branches rose into the sky on their Magino Devices. The men and witches who could not summon Magino Frames and the witches who had decided they were more effective with their Normal Frames had all moved to their assigned positions.

At 10:05, the lead 50 of the European U.A.H. Magino Devices aimed diagonally up at the moon from a position approximately 500km above Tokyo Bay, placing them near the top of the earth's thermosphere.

After that, a second wave arrived at the same altitude from off the coast of Kanagawa. Once they targeted the moon from almost dead ahead, the specks on the distant lunar surface slowly moved in response.

The black dragons and black dolls that formed the Black Witch's reinforcements began to approach the earth.

The black multitude moved out ahead of the witch.

While waiting in Shihouin Academy on the surface, Lisbeth gave her instructions.

“Formations 1 and 2, fire three volleys...!”

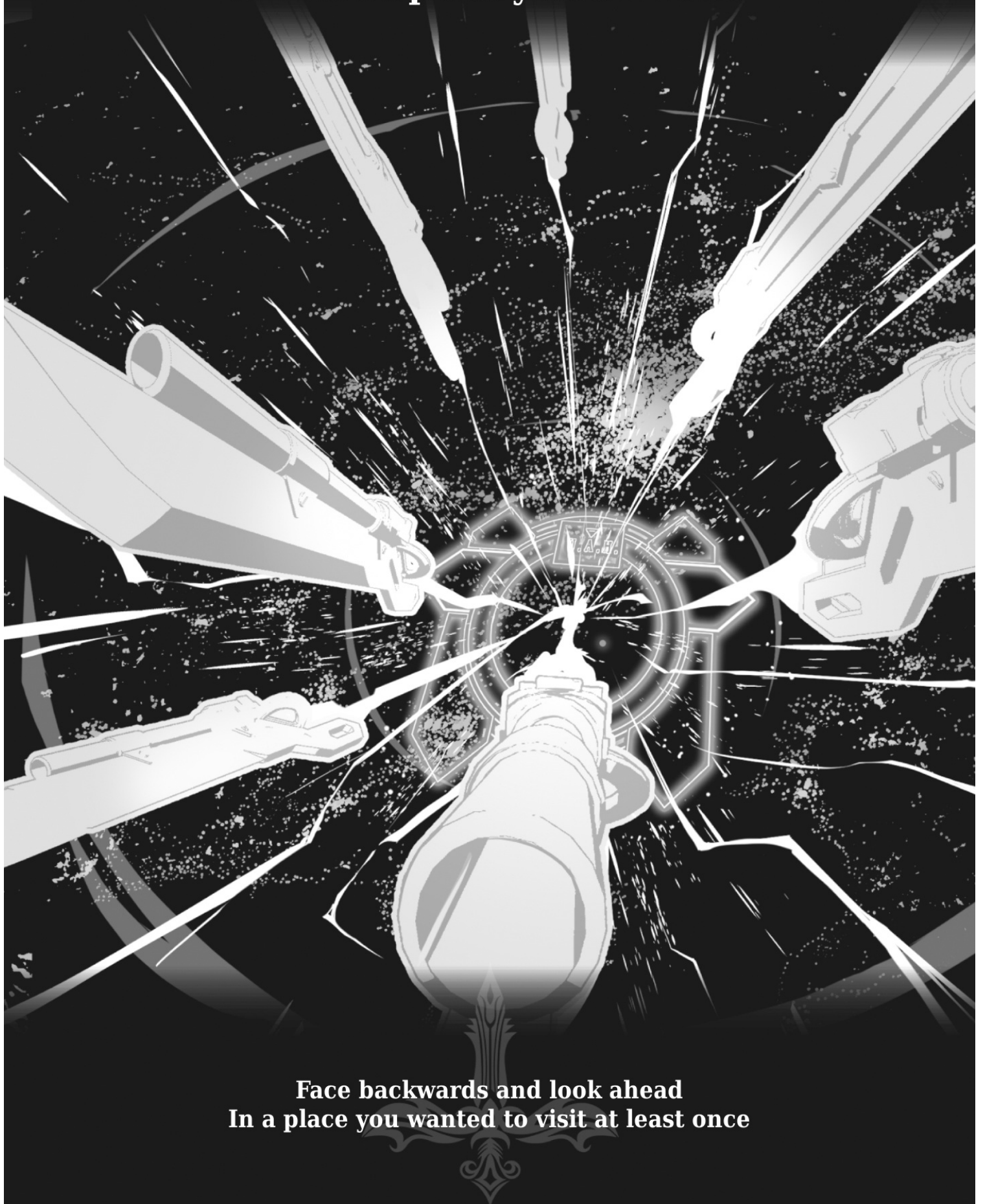
As she ordered, a total of 300 lights flew toward the moon, as if to connect the two heavenly bodies.

No one knew how many times Hexennacht had been fought, but this time it began with a preliminary skirmish.

Chapter 9: An Incompletely Seen Place

Chapter 9

“An Incompletely Seen Place”



Face backwards and look ahead
In a place you wanted to visit at least once

Face backwards and look ahead

In a place you wanted to visit at least once

With 50 to a division, the 12 divisions of European U.A.H. Magino Devices moved to the front line and formed the first line of defense.

The enemy was numerous. Considering the distance between the earth and the moon, the 500km range of the earth's thermosphere was only a slight distance and margin. But if it was breached, the earth's chances would be that much worse.

With that in mind, the Magino Devices on the front line were modified with a focus on rapid-fire and power. They focused on firing with close-range attacks as only a last resort, so they activated firing spells and cooling spells as they began their barrage toward the moon's surface.

There was no boom at their altitude. The sound reverberated from the mountains far below. The witches felt the vibrations in their bodies as sound while they watched the first round of attacks reach its destination.

"They made it...!"

The shots hit. Small explosions of light appeared within the throng of enemies. Some raised their voices in celebration, but they had to start moving and firing soon thereafter. Sniper fire from the same location only made you a good target.

They all seemed to pass each other by as their Magino Devices received the spell circle instructions informing them of their next location. The movement and attitude control were handled by the Device's management spells. The witches played their roles as a part of the interception system and simply sent their impacts toward the unseen opponents.

Or so it should have been.

"...They're so close!?"

A few people voiced their confusion, but that was the truth. Their ether sensors had checked along the range connecting the earth to the moon, but the

throng of enemies flowing along that path had rapidly picked up speed. No, this was...

“They’re swapping positions!” shouted a bookshelf witch from Italy. “They’re swapping themselves out with empty space just like swapping out two books!”

“Is there a point to that?”

“The swapping lets you ‘fill the gaps’ in addition to moving, so it speeds things up! There’s no way I could keep the mausoleum orderly otherwise! ...This is the Black Witch’s library technique!”

This was not simple movement. Like climbing steps, any empty space would be filled with the Black Witch’s reinforcements, so what had looked like sparse dust became more like a thick river.

“Don’t let it get to you!” shouted the leader of the third wave. “If you can manage, focus on firing penetrative rounds! They’ve gathered together for us, so think of it as an easier target!”

The witch’s wings created some empty space.

“...!?”

And she was hit.

It happened in an instant.

With that first hit, 32 of 600 on the front line disappeared.

Of the enemy black dragons and black dolls, the former exhaled a breath. It seemed to act like black flames and it formed round bullet shapes of the same color.

Those bullets reached the witches.

The destruction was silent. A few of the Magino Devices failed to move in time, were hit by the counter shot, and vanished.

The firepower instantly shattered the entire Device and it all scattered as ether light.

But no one looked back. They knew the same would happen to their own

Devices if they were hit.

It was a matter of sooner or later. If they were lucky, they would survive for now. And looking back would reduce that luck. That was a witch's jinx. So they all faced forward and made gestures or threw pebbles to help maintain their luck.

"Fan out in vertical layers!"

The leader's instruction was repeated by each group's control spell circles. They coordinated with each other as they determined their individual destinations. The automatically-created formation was a three-dimensional parabola.

This would stop the enemy and concentrate fire on the enemy's front tip.

Their formation was designed to allow them to scatter further in every direction, but they could not move and fire simultaneously. That was due to the design that raised their Magino Devices' power.

It was destroy or be destroyed. The downpour of enemy fire arrived amid those two options.

The enemy's volley arrived from the front of the river flowing with its replacement movement. Those black flame bullets devoured the witches.

They wore down the gunblades attempting to form a parabola in the sky, but...

"Formation 2 is in position!"

50 more Magino Devices had been on their way from the earth far below and they had caught up to the center of the parabolic formation where the bulk of the enemy fire was arriving. And they plugged themselves in like it was a power socket.

"Activate defense spell!"

Power clashed in the sky. The scattering ether light visible from the earth was mostly from defense barriers.

The enemy, which looked like a black cloud in the sky, contained quite a few explosions of light, but those impacts did not seem to be reducing the overall numbers much.

On the surface, Lisbeth received a report on the situation from a position with a decent view of the battle continuing in the sky. She was in the space between Shihouin Academy's main gate plaza and the pier. The tent and partitions prepared there were their HQ.

On Hexennacht, the moon would be directly above the ocean off the coast of Kanagawa. But they could not set up their HQ there and, even if they would be able to see the enemy's approach head-on from directly below the moon, their sense of distance would be poor and the danger of being hit by stray shells would increase.

Thus, they shifted the axis somewhat and chose Shihouin Academy.

They could not see the ocean off of Kanagawa from here, but the witch battle was fought in the sky. Lisbeth had chosen this location for their HQ because it increased their odds of survival and was a useful location for using spells and securing ether.

They were monitoring the distant midair battle in real time.

"The 1st thermosphere frontline group has engaged the enemy. 170 destroyed, 232 damaged to varying degrees! But 42% of the enemy's front line has been destroyed!"

"Excellent job."

The "enemy's front line" was only their own estimation. From the enemy's perspective, it was probably only a few percentage points of the whole.

But, thought Lisbeth. We couldn't even do this last time.

"So buy as much time as possible and keep the pressure on them! If we can scatter their drop positions using the earth's rotation, we'll have a chance to destroy them individually!"

And...

"Make sure to thank those who were lost!"

The communications and staff officer witches looked up at that. Lisbeth felt their look of slight surprise was somehow rude, but...

“I only mean to use your thanks to purify your lost luck and turn it into good luck! Do not misunderstand!”

“Wah!” cried the witches as they looked back to the spell circle consoles, but their expression had changed.

“The enemy is continuing to descend! And from behind...”

Lisbeth knew what was coming. With the vanguard’s attack complete, the next group was coming. And with more than 50% of the vanguard remaining.

“A force more than twice the size is coming! The enemy’s 2nd and 3rd waves are incoming!”

Shouko locked up her house on the moon.

She tended to wear her school uniform when heading out. And now she wished she had bought some casual clothes in that “dream”.

The minions she had designed and the witches born of her imagination were fighting along the line connecting her to the earth...or rather to her home.

It was not even worth watching. Near the top of the moon’s dark sky, lights would be scattering on the way to the distant earth.

She was not using as powerful a technique as when she had reached her hand out toward earth, but her minions were approaching the earth with serpentine movements instead.

...The slower speed only applies more pressure.

Her experience from destroying the previous worlds told her that taking her time here would make things worse for them.

But if she quickly reached out her hand like she wanted to, she would be intercepted. She had thought only her sister could strike back at something like that, but there seemed to be a few others, so she was going to pass on that one.

She would do it the old-fashioned way. And she wanted to do it the easy way. So...

“If I take it slow, what will they do?”

“Yes, we do seem to be breaching the enemy’s first formation,” Amaze replied from her side. “We have the superior numbers, after all.”

She looked up to see a small light rising beyond the black river. *Didn’t I see a light like this during a magnesium oxidation experiment a long time ago?* she thought.

“I’m not so sure,” she said, aware of the slight expectation and great restraint inside her. “If they’re going to stop me, I want them to put up a real fight here.”

Horinouchi was aware of two sides of herself: the side that could not move and the side that was itching to move.

...They’re fighting such a large battle in the sky, but I can’t take part.

She needed to focus on securing her own ether, so she had to leave everything else to the others.

After all, her job was to fight the Black Witch. What would happen if she used her power and focus on anything else?

...The same thing that happened to my mother.

Her mother had not done anything wrong. She had simply been unprepared when the unexpected had occurred.

But even if she had been prepared...

“The front line has been breached!”

The front line, which included the additional Devices, was falling apart. The enemy had approached close enough that each individual one was distinguishable when using a telescope spell. They were finally breaking the equilibrium using their numbers.

Of course, the witches had predicted this would happen, so Lisbeth’s voice arrived over a communication spell circle.

“First formation...you have permission to charge.”

Finally, thought the first formation’s leader on the front line.

The 30km-radius parabolic formation was breaking, falling, and generally transforming into an upside-down dome shape. However...

“If you have taken only light damage, descend at full speed! Join those below! If you’ve taken more damage...focus on the center!”

The defense spell witches in the center wordlessly ascended at full speed.

What would happen if the center of the dome shape jutted outwards?

The formation gained a narrow point, like a closing umbrella. And...

“Vertically stack the front line!”

The defensive witches who accelerated out front began to line up vertically. There were not many of them, but...

“Fall back once your barrier drops below 50%! Use a rotation to maintain your barriers! ...And then ascend!!”

That command was repeated again and again and again. Those many non-incantation responses sounded over the communications as the witches stabbed into the black river like a flat-tipped blade.

The very front focused only on defense. The following witches were meant to launch attacks forwards, but they launched their power elsewhere:

“Fire to the west!”

Shouko saw it from the moon.

The earthborn blade accelerated and plunged into the river, but it was unlikely to last even halfway through. The river’s density was simply too great. That made the enemy’s action a mere kamikaze attack and thus a complete waste.

“Oh, come on.”

This was not good. After all...

“I don’t even need my imagination here. It’s a foolish plan.”

“Think again, Shouko.”

Amaze seemed to see this differently, so she looked at it again.

She looked again at what the people born of her imagination were doing.

“Light...?”

“They rotated their Magino Devices to the west and fired. Then they used the recoil to return their orientation to normal and also accelerate upwards. ...That will slow them down, so they will form two levels and make sure there is never a lull in their attacks. Do you know what will happen then?”

“They’ll continue firing from the center to the west while among my reinforcements. But then the line from the center to the east can descend right past them, can’t it?”

“The enemy formation’s trajectory is angled diagonally, so it seems a third of them will descend straight down on the east.”

Shouko felt like Amaze was again asking if she understood, so she thought about what would happen. *I can’t rush this*, she told herself.

“Are the earth forces going to have a third intercept from straight ahead?”

Once she said it out loud, she realized what the light in the distant sky meant. That was not just the rapid-fire and destruction as the enemy attempted to stop her invasion.

“They’re using my minions’ explosions to split them into front and west lines, aren’t they!? If the explosions gather together too much, the western line would be thrown into chaos, so...they’re trying to shift two-thirds of the western line to the west of Japan, aren’t they!?”

“Yes. Our power cannot move the moon from above Japan now. It will move with the rotation of the earth. But the servants which have shifted from our power and are scattered throughout the air after entering the earth’s atmosphere will all flow westward. Meaning...”

Meaning...

“The enemy has cut our servants away from us, thus forcing us to let them handle it on their own. The witches who knew this would happen will be waiting along or near the belt surrounding the earth at the same latitude as Japan. ...And we can see them! Right this instant!”

“Head Butler! The Japanese wild bird witches have sent us a rough estimate! ...Approximately 88.88 million! And a third of them are currently breaking off starting from the front!”

Below the tent in Enoshima, the moon was almost directly overhead.

In the far distant sky, the battle was being fought in a region that could more or less be called outer space, so none of the sound reached them here. But the enemy’s approach grew narrower and the black river began to scatter into the western sky.

A few witches placed their hands on their chests or crossed themselves to send divine protection.

And the Head Maid checked what was written on her communication spell circle.

“Head Butler. ...The Circular Hexennacht Intercept Band has fully activated.”

“Well done.”

Koutarou expressed his praise for all of them instead of anyone in particular and he spoke into the spell circle by his hands.

“Milady. ...This is not the same as ten years ago. The entire world is standing up in defiance!”

Horinouchi saw something from the bottom of the barrier that blossomed to accept the Black Witch.

She was worried about what was happening up above and she was worried about her surroundings, so she had ascended to an altitude of 20km. That much

was safe.

“Milady!”

When Koutarou called out to her, she looked to the east and the west of Japan from her altitude.

To the east, she saw the sea beyond Boso. To the west, she could see as far as the area past Osaka, but lights appeared along the line connecting the east to the west.

Those lights grew into a band about 100km wide that cut across Japan.

It was ether light that rose to a height of about 300m.

She knew it was made up of defense and strengthening divine protections.

Where the reinforcements were dropping after the U.A.H. witches scattered them in the sky, many facilities, starting with the shrines and temples, produced support barriers for the witches assigned to each region.

And that was not all.

A report from the Horinouchi family HQ said these same barriers were being activated along the same path far, far to the west: to China, the Middle East, Europe, America, and across the Pacific Ocean.

It was a global Great Wall-style interception network.

They had not been able to do this ten years ago, but they had it now. The band of light wrapped around the globe displayed by her hands. The blue light cut a ribbon-like line horizontally across Japan and the wires for ley line pressurization support were drawn out from regions to the north or south: Australia, Taiwan, India, Africa, Scandinavia, Canada, *etc.*

“Submit.”

As soon as she hit that single key, it all manifested.

The long band of light racing across the ocean from the east completed its circuit in front of her.

The light hit and some of it sprayed upwards, but there was no sound. However, that established it all.

“Now.”

The European U.A.H. witches literally banded together and charged toward the eastern third of the black river which was still being torn apart.

“This is where the real battle begins.”

The first formation of witches saw it as they rose into the black sky.

They still could not see the whole of the earth below them, but beyond the falling black enemies, they saw a clear band of light extending east and west.

“Yes...!”

The leader’s Magino Device was mostly destroyed and she could no longer launch spells, but she nodded when she saw the results of their actions.

“That’s enough, everyone! Withdraw!”

She looked back only to find nothing there.

The witches following her had vanished. She knew what had happened. Not one of them would have fled.

...So they were lost.

With that, she faced forward. And she spoke within the river of enemies narrowing down on her from the left and right. She instructed her Magino Device to self-destruct and stood on its upper surface.

“Do you know what happened ten years ago? I was so afraid of you all that I ran away. ...And I was supposed to be with the garrison. Afterwards, I said I hadn’t expected anything like that to show up and everyone agreed with me.”

But...

“But I was part of the garrison!”

She began the self-destruct countdown. It began at a minute remaining, but she spun that down to ten seconds and smiled.

“So how about this, Black Witch!? Did you expect anything like this to show up!?”

With those words, her vision was stained with light.

Her Magino Device self-destructed and took the approaching minions out with it.

Lisbeth heard the report from the sky.

...So the splitting was a success.

The interception band had been established. They had made it for more than just defense. It also had the power to draw in targets through the ley lines as the earth rotated.

If the enemy scattered out as they descended, they would naturally end up over a wide area on the surface. So just like a jinx for ensuring a fruit landed in your hand, they had prepared a divine protection to ensure the enemies landed in the interception spots.

That said, they had needed to split up the flow of the enemy at the beginning. The “drawing in” divine protection was weak, so it would not work if the enemy dropped straight down.

Thus, dividing the enemy with the initial interception had been a crucial part of their strategy.

“And we pulled it off!”

Now they could fight so much more than ten years prior. They had lost approximately a third of their Magino Devices to accomplish it, but they could only assume that had been their best option. And...

“Ma’am! Troposphere Interception Formations 2 and 3 have been breached!”

“The enemy’s third wave has entered the stratosphere almost entirely unscathed!”

The enemy’s invasion was clearly picking up speed. In that case...

“Prepare for a surface battle. ...Deploy the main force. Have each unit charge at the enemy from the north. Intercept them while trying to drop them into the ocean!”

“Our vanguard was split, but they have arrived near the surface,” said Amaze.
“They have certainly improved their interception tactics.”

“Oh?”

Shouko was aware how rough her sigh was.

She was impressed by what she saw happening.

A halo-like ring had been placed a bit above the surface of the earth. The river of her minions had been split in two and the thicker branch was being guided toward that ring.

...I don't like this...

It felt like her black was staining the earth's decor. But...



“Yes.” She nodded. “Yes. That’s right! This is how it has to be.”

“Shouko?”

There was no point in answering Amaze’s question. She was simply happy. Happy that the product of her imagination had surpassed her imagination. And...

“It’s great that it’s turned into something so pretty and amazing. So...”

So she summoned her own Magino Frame.

She would do this as the Black Witch, not as Kagami Shouko. Also...

“Let’s go, Amaze. ...Let’s keep hope in our hearts as we head out and see what happens.”

“Head Butler! The enemy has accelerated!”

Koutarou heard the Head Maid’s voice. A large spell circle created a three-dimensional display in front of the tent and it showed their second formation falling apart and their third and fourth formations choosing to descend while wearing down the enemy before they suffered a similar fate. And on Lisbeth’s orders, the fifth unit on up began to prepare for a surface battle while the combined third and fourth formations attacked the enemy vanguard from either side.

...They still have so much momentum even after we divided them.

The descending third and fourth formations had just joined together in midair. They pursued the accelerating enemy vanguard and adopted a spiraling trajectory as they challenged the enemy to a close range battle.

The enemy had already arrived within 100km of the surface.

The witches high in the sky fired straight down at the enemy approaching the earth.

“After them!”

They all flew down headfirst while pursuing the enemy river. They and the

enemy descended with seemingly unstoppable momentum, just like water flowing down a slope. But neither side was a liquid and each individual was either one of them or the enemy. So they all accelerated but circled around so they would not be targeted.

“Our Devices lose acceleration when they fire! You know what it means to target the vanguard, don’t you?”

“We won’t do anything as lame as let them destroy us just to eliminate them!”

There was only one thing to do: avoid the black dragons’ breath bullets and the black dolls’ close-range Demon Eye Cannons, and...

“Pick up speed so you can fly right past them even while firing. ...Back home, I was said to be the fastest witch around!”

The Black Watch saw the enemy’s third and fourth formations join together.

They intended to interfere with her reinforcements which were gathering back together and accelerating.

...This I can imagine.

She had given a decent enough mission to the reinforcements which were essentially mindless.

They were like a river and they formed a “path” for her. Once they reached the surface, their “arrival” would be established and, from then on, nothing else would count as “arriving”.

Once it was all connected, it was all “the same place”. So...

“I think it’s my turn to surpass your imagination this time.”

With that, she gave a single order.

“Some excavation will be necessary before creating the path. You have made some good decisions thus far...but you didn’t think of this, did you?”

The witches were consumed by the enemy vanguard.

They accelerated at full power and then shifted that power to their cannons. They fired despite knowing this would fry their power system.

“Charge!”

The blades at the end of the Magino Devices destroyed the black dragons and black dolls at the front.

There was one thing they had to watch out for: if they made close-range attacks, the black dragons and dolls could counterattack with the same.

The black dragons made a close-range counterattack by breathing black flames over a wide area. The black dolls did so with the short-range Demon Eye Cannon they fired from the giant eye on their torso.

But if they knew it was coming, they could handle it. The movement of the dragons’ heads telegraphed their attack and the dolls’ focused their eyes in the direction they would fire.

They marked the heads and eyes with the same symbol on their spell circles and used the direction of those symbols to determine their own route.

“Let’s go!”

From there, they were at the mercy of what little power remained in their Magino Devices. After instantly using up all of their power by firing and accelerating, those Devices fell as wide-open targets. The enemy forming the new vanguard targeted them before they could recover.

“What are you looking at!?”

With that cry, more witches destroyed the vanguard once more. The first wave of witches saw that and chose to use their recovered power either to descend or return to the unit.

Not all of them could continue fighting. The individual witches only had so many Blessings. But three or four Magino Devices accelerated downward while targeting the enemies trying to stand on the vanguard.

They could already see the individual streets in the city down below. The witches with better eyesight could probably see the people moving through those streets.

“Damn, there’s no end to them...!” shouted one of the witches as she made her charge. “And we can already see the city below...!”

“What?” asked another witch who circled around next to the first. “Um, are you saying it’s pathetic to let them get this close to the people we’re supposed to be protecting!?”

“No, I’m saying the people down there can probably see us, too! I wanted to look cooler than this!”

“I suppose you would want that, wouldn’t you?”

The two of them attacked and destroyed the enemy simultaneously. An explosion erupted behind them, but...

“...Hm?”

That was their third charge, but the wind was different. They both looked back to see why.

“Stop the charge! ...Withdraw! Take anti-explosion measures!”

As soon as that voice arrived over their spell circles, it happened. A black doll on the enemy’s new vanguard had not been looking down at them.

It was looking back toward the moon and the giant stream of its own kind.

“The Demon Eye Cannon!”

The attack triggered a chain reaction of explosions that destroyed the first several hundred of the reinforcements.

More and more massive explosions of light erupted.

“...!”

Those two witches, along with the combined third and fourth formations, were blown every which way by the blast.

The Black Witch saw the explosion of light covering several hundred kilometers above the earth.

More than the explosion itself, the shockwave blew away the enemy witches.

“Excavation complete,” said the Black Witch.

The magnified view on her spell circle showed a large blank space had opened.

The witches would not arrive in time. The only ones who could continue on were her reinforcements which mindlessly advanced. They had been divided, but a third of them were headed for Japan. The remaining two-thirds would descend anywhere from Asia to Europe and even America.

“Now, then.” She said. “Let’s perform a test: is humanity’s imagination pointed more toward survival or destruction?”

The witch who had been the first formation’s leader realized she was opening her eyes.

...Huh?

Hadn’t she been caught in the same self-destruction used to take out the enemy? She had resigned herself to death.

But now she saw black dragons and dolls flowing from the moon and through the black sky. They appeared to be facing her and backing up, but that was probably not the case.

“Am I rapidly descending toward the earth?”

“Oh! You’re alive!”

She trembled when a voice spoke so near her ear.

She wondered what was going on, but she could see no one nearby. She only saw a few spell circles and an ether thread connected to her neck.

“Division Commander! I’m glad we managed to pull you away in time...!”

“My spider web follows fate, so distance is meaningless! It’s slow, though!”

Oh, I get it now, she thought. I didn’t quite die. And...

“Division Commander! You’ll be an underling once you’re down here! Witches who have used up their Blessings can only do things like guide people at crosswalks, after all!”

“We’ll be done here after we pull in another five people, including you! And then I’ll have to go deliver bentos for the first time in my life!”

But...

“You were the last one we retrieved! Thank you for leading us without running away!”

While she fell and was pulled down, she thought about those words: *This is where it truly begins.*

She had made up for her past. That time from ten years ago was now over. From here on, each minute and second was a fight to reach the future. So...

“Come on. Make a counterattack...!”

Her wish was granted.

As she fell, a line of power passed by her side and pierced the sky directly above.

She knew who had to have fired that attack that tore through everything in the vicinity, regardless of its actual trajectory. That came from...

“Elsie Hunter!!”

Horinouchi saw the power stab through the sky, tear apart the enemy vanguard, and pierce its center for a few thousand kilometers.

“That’s insane.”

“Huh? And yet I’m only Rank 3. What’s up with that?”

“Hm, I wonder who’s in Rank 1 then,” said Horinouchi to play dumb.

But Hunter’s timing had been superb.

“Can you fire a second one?”

“It’s really hard to control the intersecting satellites for the counterattack.”

The fact that she did not say it was impossible was a lot like her, or perhaps a lot like America.

Regardless, the shell had split apart the black river approaching from the east,

but...

...Ah.

Some horribly chilly air arrived from the moon. It was like an ether-carried “presence” that arrived before the actual heat or power. And that meant...

“Mitsuru, can you hear this?”

She knew what Lisbeth was going to say.

“The Black Witch has left the moon. ...Her Magino Device has begun its descent.”

“Now, let’s go.”

The flow of the black army had been split. The initial division by the witches and the attack from the enemy’s elite had clearly defined the overall division.

One branch straight ahead and the other to the west. Once the ‘mold’ was set, the phase of the flow was fixed in place.

The Black Witch knew which of the two branches she should take with her Magino Device: straight ahead. Also...

“The vanguard’s numbers were reduced quite a bit, but some of them have reached the surface. What will you do?”

With that, she “swapped places” with the very front of her vanguard.

“I will do you all one favor.”

A school’s front gate lay before her eyes.

It belonged to Shihouin Academy. There, she saw the HQ of the organization built to fight her. That primarily meant European U.A.H in this case. Their leader was also there.

That leader woman had had both eyes ten years before, but the Black Witch remembered her.

She asked her a question from atop her Magino Device.

“How about this?”

Chapter 10: If You Direct the Way

Chapter 10

“If You Direct the Way”



Yes, yes, yes, this way
It's probably safe, definitely safe
I haven't gone that way myself, though

Yes, yes, yes, this way

It's probably safe, definitely safe

I haven't gone that way myself, though

Fleur had been dismissed as a battery.

On Lisbeth's merciless instructions the night before, some witches had greeted her with smiles and taken her to a waiting area in Yokohama.

She had assumed the waiting area was for evacuees, but it was full of witches. Lots and lots of witches.

She had heard a number of things there. Kagami's condition was stable and Horinouchi's group was prepared for battle.

Her mother had often told her about the preparations that would be made for Hexennacht. If she had still been the Rank 1, she would have been there herself.

So she had mostly known what was going on and she could simulate it in her mind better than a lot of those actually involved in it. Based on those memories, she knew the inland area was relatively safe.

Since the battle would be held off the coast of Kanagawa, being as far inland as Kawasaki would have been better, but Yokohama had plenty of places to have fun and that gave her more motivation to protect it. So first of all...

"So what am I supposed to do as a battery?"

"Eh?"

"What was that 'eh' for?"

"Miss...Fleur? Do you have some kind of artifact?"

When she asked, it sounded like they were prepared to use a drain spell to supply themselves with Blessings, but...

"Generally, the land's keystone or some other artifact will have been charged at a shrine or temple, so we can extract Blessings from that."

“Wow! So you’ve never seen a human battery before! Neither have I!”

They decided to try it out, so they found a convenient keystone nearby and attempted to transfer her Blessings into it.

Five seconds after they began, the keystone split apart and ether burst out, which was no fun for anyone.

“That wasn’t my fault! It’s Lisbeth’s fault!”

“I heard that,” said a disembodied voice.

Curse that old lady.

At any rate, Fleur did not feel like she had used up any Blessings at all.

“Am I just really pent up because I haven’t been using any spells lately?”

That got her displeased looks from several directions, but that happened a lot.

The witch in charge of the drain spell was from Eastern Europe and belonged to Shihouin Academy’s Spell Division. She was a second year, but she knew a lot about indigenous spells related to herbs and soil. So they quickly found a common interest.

“Right!? Right!? Those flowers are the best because you can use them to get all sorts of cats to show up!”

“Yes! And if you make an even stronger potion out of it and have someone drink it, they’ll be horny for like three days straight, which is always hilarious! I had my crush drink some, but he ended up fucking a neighborhood tree and got questioned by the police! So I must rank lower than a tree!”

“You actually did it!?”

She was a practical sort of witch, so it was a lot of fun.

At any rate, they managed to supply Blessings to keystones, statues, and protective charms which were small enough to carry around, but Fleur did not feel any weaker for it. In fact...

“I feel like...you know how they say bleeding a little stimulates hematosi?”

“U-um, none of our equipment can hold it all, so please don’t go all out!”

But after all that, she had been dismissed. As for why, it was looking more likely that the inland area was going to be part of the battlefield, so if she was not going to the waiting area in Fujisawa, she was to help the people evacuate and take shelter.

She had no way of moving herself and she considered evacuating with them if necessary, so she parted ways with the drain witch and moved out into the thick of things armed with guide lights. She had also been given a helmet with the following explanation:

“You’ll understand once you get there!”

Five minutes later, a black doll had fallen on the waiting area and caused a real mess of things. *But now I’m this crosswalk’s guardian deity.*

However...

“Hexennacht is a lot different from how mama described it.”

Something was different this time.

The first one to notice was Mary who had already sensed that presence in her previous world.

...Is that...?

They were on the border between the Uraga Channel and the ocean at an altitude of 7km. To stabilize Hunter’s shellfire, she had formed an open barrier with her annihilation spell and she kept the water level inside it.

She was briefly confused when *that* appeared behind her.

Why? she wondered before remembering that such questions meant nothing with this opponent. Thus...

“Second Headmaster...!”

As soon as she sent that transmission, she saw light in the northern sky.

Lisbeth was confronting the Black Witch.

Lisbeth did not immediately attack.

The other witches in the area had yet to evacuate, so she had to buy some time. But the black Magino Device floating in front of her was an even more refined version of the one she had seen in her memories countless times.

...It looks a lot like Kagami's Device.

It was a non-transformation type, but it was a Multi-Device that could fire projectiles of light from the blade.

And the enemy spoke while facing her from atop the Magino Device.

"I will do you a favor. This will be the final battle. Because I intend to destroy this world. So..."

The Black Witch raised her hand.

Lisbeth assumed she was launching an attack, but that proved incorrect. Far overhead, a new blackness appeared from beyond the black river the witches had worn down.

"Lisbeth! A fifth enemy formation has appeared!"

That was not all. Something like lightning fell from the moon to the ocean off of Kanagawa.

It looked like an instantaneous bolt of lightning, but it was not. The path the lightning took told Lisbeth what had happened.

"Damn you...!"

She cursed at the Black Witch who smiled in the moonlight.

"I have released the seal. Because 'I am here'," she said. "You can't exactly complain, can you? ...Forget just using your champion. Come at me as a group, witches. After all, I have already eliminated the strongest witch you had been building up."

So that's how she's doing it, thought Hunter.

...The Black Witch removed her own seal and says she wants a death match.

That seemed like a huge plus for the witches, but it was not actually.

Where should they go? How should they fight? Where should they fight?

They suddenly had to answer all of those questions.

Not only could they no longer use most of their plans or strategies, but even with so many more witches available, only the ones as strong as Hunter herself could hope to hit the Black Witch with their attacks.

Plus, the Black Witch could use her descending reinforcements as a diversion.

“Rank 3!”

She understood the situation. She totally understood what she needed to do. And supporting Lisbeth was not the answer.

“We need to support Miss Horinouchi so she doesn’t go on a futile rampage!”

Yeah, that’s what I thought.

“I-I am not going to go on a futile rampage!”

20km above the ocean off of Kanagawa, the black reinforcements could be seen splitting into two branches far overhead. One branch descended toward Yokohama and Kawasaki while the other flowed far to the west.

Horinouchi knew the sealing barrier had been neutralized.

The barrier blossoming around her had absorbed the lightning from the sky and shattered.

The method was simple: read the ether pathways forming the barrier – that is, its structure within the ley line network – and send in enough ether to overload it. The ether overflow would blow away any spell fixed there.

The method itself was simple, but accurately reading the barrier’s structure from the moon would have been extremely difficult.

...Of course, she can do it without going through all the normal steps.

If the Black Witch could imagine it, she could use her power in a way that intervened. It may have been simpler to say any phenomenon she could

image was automatically turned into a spell.

Horinouchi could logically explain how the barrier had been destroyed, but it had looked like being crushed from above.

In that case, the latter explanation was probably accurate.

And she was about to fight an enemy like that. Or she was supposed to have.

“The Black Witch is at Shihouin Academy, isn’t she!?”

“You can’t, Miss Horinouchi!”

She knew why Mary was stopping her. Firing from here would not accomplish anything.

“You’re telling me to wait until the battlefield is better prepared, aren’t you!?”

“Eh?” said Hunter.

After a while, a spell circle arrived, displaying an overhead-view diagram of Tokyo Bay. A red dot appeared in the center, spread outwards, and stopped after fully covering the bay.

“Do you know what this is?” asked Hunter in monotone.

“The Black Witch’s barrier or her attack range?”

Silence followed.

What is this? she wondered with an odd sweat after more than five seconds passed.

Mary’s voice finally gave the answer.

“Miss Horinouchi, that is the extent of the damage if you fired one of your standard shells at full power from that altitude.”

“A standard shell?”

She watched as the red range grew even further. The eastern end passed the Boso Peninsula and reached the Pacific Ocean.

“And this is with a reinforced shell,” said Hunter. “Still wanna shoot?”

...Well, shooting is still an option on the table.

If it was guaranteed to defeat the Black Witch, Hunter thought that was a perfectly valid choice.

But that opponent was the problem.

They assumed the Black Witch had the ability to neutralize anything they could normally imagine.

That was why they had not had the 7th Fleet send in a wide-range attack spell with a missile.

...If only we had Kagami...

You never knew what that idiot was going to do, but she had a way of finishing things.

“Rank 3, what are you thinking about?”

“...About getting rear-ended high in the sky near Brazil.”

“Miss Horinouchi can be just as bad.”

Don't make it a competition, thought Hunter, but Horinouchi *was* pretty bad. Firing from the pole and the Geo Frame had both come from her imagination.

Horinouchi had not realized it herself, but Hunter kind of understood why Kagami had accepted her. When Kagami first met her in this world and copied her Device construction spell, she must have found some kind of originality there. Kagami had seen something that surpassed her own ideas, so she had concluded that Horinouchi stood on the forefront in that field.

...And she stands on the forefront of attack power too!

Kagami must have seen that going in.

But that imagination advantage had grown much weaker now.

“Horinouchi? Can you hear me? The destruction of the seal barrier shows that the Black Witch knows your location. That means you're standing on the board of her imagination. Of course, there's nowhere to run on this battlefield, but we do have a chance of distracting her for now.”

That being...

“The European U.A.H. Representative is going to battle the Black Witch...!”

...So Horinouchi is going to regroup with Hunter and Mary.

That’s for the best, thought Lisbeth. They did not need to come support her. After all...

“I was judged unworthy ten years ago, so joining me will not allow them to win in the ‘now’.”

After speaking that line, she saw the Black Witch nod atop her Magino Device.

The Black Witch held a book below her left arm, pointed at Lisbeth with her right hand, and then pointed into the western sky.

“Then to clean up after ten years ago, I will destroy the now and the thereafter.”

“Well, aren’t you full of yourself...!”

Lisbeth could tell how tense her brow was as she had her Magino Device leap forward.

She had it leap, not fly. She instantly filled the gap.

“Go, twin swords!”

Koutarou controlled several battlefields.

The European U.A.H. HQ at Shihouin Academy was not currently functioning. Their equipment seemed to be running, but...

...Has Lady Lisbeth begun to fight!?

Depending on the outcome, the European U.A.H. HQ could lose all decision-making ability and would only function as an information relay point.

Currently, the U.A.H.J. HQ set up at the Okunitama Shrine in Fuchu, Tokyo, seemed to be giving commands and making decisions according to a program, but most of the information processing that had been sent to the European U.A.H. HQ was being sent here instead.

Koutarou could see the movements of Horinouchi and the others they were in charge of and he could see the status of the battle that had begun at Shihouin Academy courtesy of the European U.A.H. HQ.

The Head Maid had once worked for Lisbeth and she was scanning and processing the data arriving from European U.A.H. Countless spell circles stacked up and she even used a foot pedal spell interface to work through it all.

“...!”

“Head Maid! ...Someone take over the trajectory calculations for the Head Maid!”

The Head Maid glared back at him for that. It was a sharp look, but he rivaled her when it came to glasses.

“Head Maid, let someone else handle all the trajectory calculation processing. You have more important matters to work on.”

The Head Maid eventually nodded and then looked back toward the spell circles.

“...Well done, Head Butler.”

“Eh?”

“I am not saying it again.”

As she returned to work, some of the witches around her raised their hands and groups of spell circles flew over to them.

...What was that?

Koutarou felt like she had said something incredible, but his brain’s processing could not keep up.

And the rest of you, enough with all that whistling. I need to focus on this work coming in. After all...

“Lady Lisbeth has begun a close-range battle with the Black Witch...!”

Man, I’m getting old! concluded Lisbeth with such refreshing self-awareness that it shocked even her.

They had just completed a rough circuit of Tokyo Bay and they were flying south. A shockwave caused pillars of water to erupt on either side of her as she pursued the retreating Black Witch.

She was already moving too fast to hear the sound around her.

The nighttime bay reflected the moon and waves were formed by the land battle and anti-air fire.

And the Black Witch fired endlessly to keep her away.

Her attacks were massive. Even the secondary cannons had as much power as the main cannon of Lisbeth's Magino Device and the Device itself showed no wavering in its speed or trajectory.

...So this is creation instead of ether gathering...!

Amid the endless shellfire, the sword tip would occasionally turn Lisbeth's way and the main cannon would fire.

The attack would split the bay, draw an arc through the air, and vanish into the sky. Lisbeth was known for her one-hit kill attacks, but even she felt a chill. But as she evaded and continued pursuit, she had a definite thought.

...I have gotten old!

In the past, she could have dodged a barrage like this barehanded. It was not for nothing she had been able to take on Cerisier's environment spell and she had had a much easier time getting her surefire attack through there than Mitsuyo had.

But she was being worn down.

Am I whitewashing my memories? she wondered, but she cast aside that line of thinking.

"This isn't whitewashing! I really was incredible in the past...!"

But now she was getting old. That was only natural. But if she did what she had to as someone older, there was a different path for her.

"Give me strength...!"

Her own power was not enough to continue pursuit while dodging a homing

barrage of at least 32 shots.

So she delegated the evasion route processing to the others.

She set an observation spell to send over the enemy's movements and chose the best combination out of the reaction patterns instantly returned to her. She included her own decisions in the mix to cancel out any lag, but...

"I'm still being worn down!?"

The damage to her Magino Device was already beyond "light". But...

"Senpai!"

I told you long ago not to call me that. But that definite underclassman gave her permission.

"Your Phlogiston Heart has reached max heat! Please focus on attacking!"

Koutarou saw it on an ether detection spell circle.

A mass of light appeared between the dots representing the Black Witch's Magino Device and Dragoon, Lisbeth's Magino Device.

He knew what had happened. Even from Enoshima, the sky was bright above the Uraga Channel at the south end of Tokyo Bay.

"...Was that a full-power blast from the Black Witch!?"

Petals of light scattered around them.

The Head Maid and the other witches had flipped around their spell circles and turned them to flowers. They had instantly processed evasion routes for hundreds of shots and destroyed the completed ones so they would not get in the way.

"...Ah!"

They sped up. It looked like all of their work had briefly grown slower, but...

...Is this...?

He understood. Their burst of acceleration was not just in response to Lisbeth's request for processing.

“Are you processing predictive patterns as well!?”

“It is a maid’s duty to predict her guest’s requests.”

What should he say about her saying “guest” instead of “master”?

“Well done, Head Maid.”

When he said that...

“Huh?”

The Head Maid looked back, blushed, and froze in place for just a moment.
And all the other witches...

“You idiooooooot!”

As they shouted abuse, the Head Maid quickly struck empty air with her right arm. Values settled into all of the spell circles and were returned. They were sent to...

“Senpai! The rest is up to you!”

The Black Witch saw a single answer.

...So there are several ways to surpass my imagination.

She had long thought of two ways.

One was to have a genius opponent utterly outdo her inventiveness.

The other was for the entire world to evolve such that everyone rose above her imagination.

But what she saw now was different.

The witch fighting her here was likely in the top five of this world. But she was focusing on pursuing the Black Witch above all else. The only talent needed for that was her instincts for evasion and Device control.

But she lacked *that*. This witch had probably always excelled at close-range combat. The design of her Device made it clear the long-range attack cannons had been added on afterwards.

The Black Witch could shoot down an opponent like this by staying on the

move and firing a barrage of homing shots.

And yet the black blade remained on her tail.

She skipped off the surface of the Uraga Channel, spun through the air, and broke through the barrage even as it tore into her.

The Black Witch understood this trick. Countless spell circles flowed around the witch on the Device and they shattered to sublimate the text written on them.

She was supporting by a large backup crew.

“So that’s it...”

This was a third method of surpassing the Black Witch’s imagination.

Even if each individual was ordinary, what would happen if they gathered together and worked together as a single whole?

This was a collection of data and control.

This quantity and multi-faceted accuracy were impossible for a single genius to produce.

A sense of purpose created it faster than the world could change.

The Black Witch alone could not fully read the product of that gathering. So...

“Don’t underestimate us, Black Witch...!”

The enemy witch yelled at her while ducking and leaping through the sky.

“We are not alone...”

But...

“We can become one...!”

The black gunblade accelerated. Spell circles displaying its destination shattered as it raced through the sky.

Endless cannon fire flew its way. Some flew in clusters of straight lines and others circled around to the side or back, so there was no overall standard.

But the black gunblade moved forward.

As if to say it knew where it would not be hit, it evaded and advanced at the same time, which ultimately became a series of gentle curves.

“Go, Dragoon! This is your final job!”

The cannon fire arrived from extreme close-range now. But...

“You did a wonderful job, underclassman...!”

With those words, the black gunblade accelerated.

The clusters of incoming shells were homing. It directed its blade directly toward them.

“...My blade can break through!”

The Head Maid realized their trick had been set up.

She had understood *this* ever since Lisbeth had taken such wide evasive action.

She had understood that Lisbeth’s close-range blade could slice through even above-average cannon blasts.

Lisbeth could slice through the attack and continue forward, so why had she chosen to dodge instead?

As someone who had known her in the past, the Head Maid was probably the only person who knew why.

So she had done it.

She had kept that power hidden instead of using the Magino Device blade when it would not really matter.

“I made sure it would provide a decisive blow in the end. ...Does that work for you, guest?”

The black gunblade caught up with the pitch black sword.

It did not hesitate to charge right into the many homing shells arriving from

dead ahead.

“Go!”

The gunblade’s blade sliced through one of the shells like a piece of fruit.

All that remained was to fly forward.

So she did.

Pillars of water burst from the ocean on either side and the shockwave scattered that water into a whirling mist as the gunblade artlessly slipped through the single shell gap.

That power simply moved straight ahead.

A moment later, Lisbeth swung the Device in her hand atop the gunblade.

At the same time, the Magino Device’s blade glowed and power raced along it.

“I shall cut you down...!”

Immediately, another power opposed it.

It was the Black Witch’s sword. The Black Witch herself spun around while standing atop it.

It was a light motion, as if there was no core to her body, but the motion swung around the Normal Device controller that she held.

“Impressive.”

But...

“This still ‘matches’ my imagination.”

The Black Witch’s Normal Device launched black light on the level of a main cannon blast.

The counterattack perfectly matched Lisbeth’s timing.

The Black Witch heard the air bursting and saw the black light smash the enemy.

Fragments of the black gunblade Magino Device burst outward while surrounded by the fog created by the explosive blast. They quickly struck the air and flew into the distance.

...That ends that.

The sound could not keep up.

She simply saw the components of the blown-up Device return to ether light and scatter.

The Black Witch lightly swung down her Normal Device sword.

“Next. I had wanted to recover some ether, but...”

She noticed something odd as she said that.

“...?”

The mist and fragments of the enemy witch’s Device were vanishing into the distance behind her, but for some reason, *she had a detailed view* of that result.

The object she saw there was compressing to the sides, like a cat narrowing its eyes.

...What is this?

As soon as she wondered that, the distant enemy Magino Device’s final component returned to ether light.

It was the cannon. But there was one thing she could not see.

“Where did the sword go...!?”

The enemy Magino Device had a gunblade design, but among the destroyed parts, she had only seen the cannon that had been added on almost as an afterthought. So where was the rest?

“Shouko! ...Spatial cutting!”

Amaze gave that warning just before something appeared.

The surrounding scenery squeezed in and bent before the center shattered and it appeared.

“A black sword...!”

The enemy Device was upside-down as it split the air as only the sword.
And the enemy witch stood atop the flipped blade.
She was unharmed.

Lisbeth simply moved.

The cannon had been added to her Device after the fact. She could focus the power on the blade and the acceleration system by purging it, but that severely reduced her ability to gather ether.

If she was going to abandon the cannon, it had to be at the very end.

Her underclassman had predicted that the enemy would have another attack ready even if Lisbeth sliced through the enemy's shells with her blade.

That witch had not been very thoughtful in the past, but that must have changed.

She had suggested discarding the cannon just in case.

Lisbeth could have gone in for a hit with the very first attack, but that probably would have been blocked.

She was up against the Black Witch. The Black Witch's imagination could probably account for even that kind of last-ditch effort.

After moving right in front of the enemy while expecting to get hit by a close-range counterattack, Lisbeth had used the Device's spatial cutting to drop the Device itself downwards.

So...

"I said I would cut you down, didn't I?"



The enemy's attack hit the purged cannon and now Lisbeth delivered the final blow.

She could do this.

She had a way. She placed a hand on her eyepatch and pulled a Device from there.

It was a single-edged sword. It matched the one she already held in the other hand. Instead of just raising them, she reversed her elbows and wrists to cross them and raise them together.

"Sever, twin swords...!"

While upside-down, she sliced open a spatial fissure.

"Impressive," said the Black Witch while feeling a slight flush to her cheeks. "Then I have something to show you. Both in appreciation of the imagination you have demonstrated and to ensure you never use that method again."

She simply spread her hands, dropped them down from overhead, and stated the form of her creation: "Switch places."

Lisbeth saw empty space spread out before her eyes.

Her vision told her she had caught up to the Black Witch.

Except that was not what had happened.

...Were our positions swapped!?

It was the same method the Black Witch had used to come here from the moon and to accelerate her reinforcements. Not taking it into consideration had been their own failing.

If Lisbeth had still had her cannon, she could have used its ether fuel for acceleration and escaped. But...

"...I used it all up."

She had used up herself, the others, and...

“My frustration and regrets from ten years ago...!”

She had done everything she could, and this was the result.

She did not even need to look back. She knew her own power.

Her Magino Device would be sliced apart and scattered by the spatial cutting she herself had launched.

What was the Black Witch thinking as she watched from her swapped-out position behind Lisbeth?

“You aren’t all that impressive yourself, Black Witch,” said Lisbeth as the light and noise of her Device’s destruction washed over her. “If you can’t imagine a new method, you should come to my school.”

“True enough,” said the Black Witch as she watched the explosion of her enemy’s fully-destroyed Magino Device.

She had indeed been quite insulting to her enemy.

It had been sudden and effective, but she had responded with something old. So...

“I won’t use this method any longer. ...That was the latest method *ten years ago*. Let’s just leave it at that.”

This battle had ended everything from ten years prior. From there, she secured the ether light from the enemy’s exploding Device.

...I will settle this with the current latest method.

What was that? She had already revealed it once, but...

“Summon Satanic Frame!”

The fifth wave she had called had arrived in the sky above, so she looked up at it and smiled.

“This is the end, products of my imagination...!”

The Head Maid accepted that all information processing requests from

Lisbeth had ceased.

And at the same time, another maid gave a report.

“Head Maid! And Head Butler too, I guess! I’m picking up a massive ether reading at the Uraga Channel!”

“You guess!? What do you mean you guess!?”

Pipe down back there. But they all knew what this was. The ether reading had been described as “massive” not “powerful”. So when they looked back, they saw something beyond the hills of Zushi that hid Uraga.

...Is that a knee?

A Queen-style Device rose more than 3km tall.

At this distance, they could only see up to the bottom of its chest.

This is a nightmare, she thought.

The sword it held was the original Magino Device increased to several times its size and the fifth wave of enemies descended behind it like a cape.

That nightmare personified began to move.

Beyond the hilly region, it started to enter the Yokohama region as if to head vaguely toward Tokyo.

The main battlefield was not the ocean off of Kanagawa.

Fighting there would give an advantage to Akerindou and the other Rankers.

Did the Black Witch not want to assist the enemy or did she simply like the cities of Yokohama and Kawasaki?

And just as the Head Maid wondered what to do about that giant being...

“Head Maid, instruct everyone to prepare some tea.”

The Head Butler’s words reminded her who she was. No, she had been trying to do that herself, but she had been looking at herself in the wrong way.

To refresh her mood, she raised her right hand to her forehead.

She took a deep breath, snapped her fingers, and swung her hand outwards.

“Understood, Head Butler. ...Anyone who is free should prepare some tea. And add some snacks as well.”

“Wah,” cried out one witch among the sighs of relief.

She held a report saying the enemy’s fifth wave had arrived. And it had begun to destroy the Yokohama region as if to support that giant Device.

This was a crisis. However...

“A witch must not fear a crisis.”

Once she said it, she felt that way herself. A witch’s words held power. That was what this was.

Because she knew just how tense she was, she formed a small smile on her face. And all she had to say was what she honestly thought: “Don’t worry, everyone. ...Lady Mitsuru and the others will emerge victorious. That is a foregone conclusion.”

Chapter 11: Can I Pass?

Chapter 11

“Can I Pass?”



A night
On which fear will not arrive

A night

On which fear will not arrive

There's a black waterfall in the sky, thought Hunter.

That was the enemy. The dark cascade fell from the moon.

Starting from the first wave, the Black Witch's minions flowed down toward the surface.

Hunter and Mary had decided to hurry toward the Uraga Channel where the European U.A.H. Representative and the Black Witch were fighting. So they had started in that direction from the ocean off of Kanagawa while protecting Akerindou, but...

...Is there no end to the new enemies!?

The Black Witch's giant Device had appeared and a fifth wave of enemies was descending from the sky, so things had gotten much more dangerous.

They could no longer call it a river or rain falling from the sky. It was a full house of black dragons and black dolls.

It was fortunate that the enemies were no longer "building up their numbers" on the moon, but they must have all been approaching at once because they fell from the sky like a solid wall.

Hunter and Mary fired their secondary cannons while feeling the pressure from the silent communication spell circle that Horinouchi had sent them earlier.

"Mary!"

"I know!"

With that, a band of explosions raced across the sky.

It was a horizontal line. Mary had laid out her annihilation spell like a razor wire and let it slice through all of the falling enemies.

Those explosions raced across the enemy and triggered further explosions that covered 3km horizontally and 12km vertically.

Of course, it did not all end there. Hunter saw something else as she fired straight up.

The gap they had torn in the enemy curtain revealed the Black Witch's humanoid Device to the east.

That was the Yokohama region and they were still in the ocean near Kanagawa, about halfway between Oshima and Kamakura, so they were 40km away.

But the light in its eyes was visible even from that distance.

The humanoid Device's eyes had definitely marked them. And...

"...Oh."

The Black Witch's humanoid Device stabbed its long black sword into the earth.

Something happened a moment later.

Hunter was in the air, but somehow an earthquake reached her.

...Are you kidding!?

The falling waterfall of enemies had suddenly shaken.

They all shook and accelerated like the string holding them up had been cut.

"They're all going to fall!"

She needed to fight back, but...

...Is there anything I can do against this many!?

Horinouchi sent a silent spell circle, but Hunter broke it with her right fist.

She honestly thought, *If only Kagami was here.*

"Kagami would know how to deal with Horinouchi at a time like this..."

Kagami was sleeping.

She felt like she was dreaming for the first time in a long while.

It was a dream of her past.

But the contents were quite clear, so it might have been her life flashing before her eyes or perhaps her memories were replaying because her mind was not properly anchored.

In her memories, she was wise, considerate, and yet humble. Until having this dream, she had wondered if she was altering her memories to her own benefit, but this told her that was not so.

Now she never again had to worry as she remembered how great she was.

Regardless, she remembered a great many things.

Instead of just standing and watching, she decided to have her mind sit down and watch. She found the dream was mostly of when she had played with her sister.

Despite being in middle school, her sister had said some ridiculous things, so Kagami had asked what she was doing, swiped what she was writing, read it, and then cried.

She was pretty sure it had been a story of a dog.

Dogs were cheating.

It just was not playing fair.

Anyone would cry at that.

So she had told her sister to write a story about adults.

Her sister had done so and Kagami had read it, not expecting much since it was written by a middle schooler, but she had found herself laughing.

Her sister had been aware she was only a middle schooler and had written it to get laughs.

That was cheating too.

So Kagami had told her to write something more serious. She had starting getting into video games at the same time, so she had suggested her sister write something like that.

Kagami had always preferred world history over Japanese history and she had been learning about politics and economics, so she had checked over the story.

Before long, she had been telling the story of the characters along with her sister and, before she realized it, she had found she could write a decent story herself.

That had been a mistake.

Once Kagami started making stories, her sister had grown upset, said she could not compete with her, and started obsessively gathering materials.

Then that fateful day had arrived. Her sister had previously said she had found “some amazing material”, but that was the day she had shown it to Kagami. It was a black hardcover book. The writing on the cover had been indecipherable to Kagami, but her sister had said “It’s the Book of Creation. I call it Amaze.” and opened the pages.

“—————”

No further.

I remember the rest quite well. It is not hazy and I have not altered my memories.

I lacked imagination, so I couldn’t read what was created, what happened, or what changed there.

At some point, everything had fallen apart and she had traveled through many worlds. But...

“Yes.”

Thinking back, there was one thing she had never said to her sister.

And...

“I cannot believe this.

Wasn’t I planning to say something when I said goodbye to Horinouchi?

She had yet to do so.

She had not tried saying the words that would confirm whether or not her imagination was correct.

The battlefield had moved to Yokohama.

Fleur received instructions from the manager of this jurisdiction and she guided the people.

She did not do it all at the same place. Once the evacuating people were organized and sent in the right direction, the manager would send her elsewhere.

Each time, two or three male U.A.H.J. members would stay behind to check for people who had not yet escaped, but...

...Isn't that really dangerous?

The ones who remained were wearing light armored uniforms and she decided to ask just out of curiosity.

"Isn't it dangerous staying behind?"

"Don't be ridiculous! ...There might be a cute girl here!"

It was an immediate answer.

"I'll put this delicately: what if it's an old person or a middle-aged man?"

"They might be a cute girl's family member!" The man clenched his right fist so tight it trembled. "And the desire to protect someone helps maintain our defense spells!"

"So your personal tastes and practicality are in alignment..."

"Just leave it to us!" he said with a smile, but his resolve was quite something. After all, the enemy reinforcements were flowing down from the sky toward the coast of Yokohama. So Fleur mimicked the drain spell she had seen before.

"Here you go. ...This is enough for 3 or 4 more people, so share the Blessings with them."

At first, he did not know what she meant, but then he checked his status on a spell circle.

"Wow! ...Now I have to hope for a girl even cuter than you!"

"Go help her out then."

Fleur smiled and left for the next next location. But...

“Eh?”

They were working upstream along the river that flowed into the ocean through Sakuragi-cho, Yokohama.

A sign said it was the Ooka River. It grew somewhat narrower as they moved upstream and, as the next train station came into view on the opposite bank, *it* arrived.

She had just guided some people across the crosswalk, but...

...*Oh?*

On the evacuated eastern side, a building in Sakuragi-cho collapsed and a giant form appeared.

It was a black dragon. It was about 200m tall. It had most likely descended from the sky and bounced thrice while rolling toward them.

They had been using the buildings as cover while evacuating the people, but...

“—————”

Ah, it looked me in the eye, she thought.

That was when it happened.

She first felt a tremor in the earth and then she realized the black dragon was running toward her.

But she was looking at something other than the approaching dragon.

Through the valley created by the destroyed buildings, a group of many more black figures were bouncing, running, and releasing their breath.

And standing in the center of that black wave was the giant humanoid Device that Fleur had seen the night before. That was...

“Shouko...?”

The pilot of an airborne fighter saw it all.

His primary duties were forceful reconnaissance and to carry witches to the

battlefield. Two F-23s had been launched from Atsugi and the latter mission had already been completed, so they were taking turns with the former mission.

They could not let themselves be shot down.

So they chose a mission altitude outside the attack range of the black dragons and black dolls fighting on the surface. They had weapons, but provoking the enemy and becoming a target would rob everyone of their wide-range surveillance. That meant they could not interfere, but...

“Damn...!”

People, primarily those assigned to the rear guard, were being evacuated down below.

The inland area had been deemed relatively safe, but the Black Witch had made a change of plans and that was no longer true. So everyone was being guided further inland or inside barriers and underground shelters, but...

“They were spotted!”

The black dolls and dragons were generally about 200m tall. Some were as tall as 500m, but those were not suited for urban areas and were descending toward the coast and rivers instead.

Meanwhile, the manmade structures were tall. *Excellent work, modern architecture*. Even the 200m giants had difficulty seeing the surface when there were a few buildings in between. And those buildings acted as shields and as cover when moving.

They could guess that the Black Witch was currently establishing a foothold.

The destruction of Yokohama would plow and prepare the earth for the creation of the barrier needed for the wide-range activation of her spell.

And what would that spell do? Destroy this world.

So if they could evacuate faster than the Black Witch could spread her preparation of the earth, they could survive.

Or so the theory went.

The problem was the Black Witch's reinforcements. It was the shape and traits of those minions.

They were round. They were also soft. And that softness was the kind that bounced, not that drooped.

So when one of them fell to the ground in just the wrong way, it bounced toward the evacuees.

It destroyed countless buildings, but one building that could not be broken caused the black dragon to bounce upwards.

When the black dragon fell into the valley formed by a road, some evacuees were crossing that road 700m ahead.

They had been spotted. The black dragon ran toward them while spewing breath from its mouth.

There was nothing the pilots could do. There were no witches around to run over and help. All of those were fighting in the sky or at the center of Yokohama which had become the borderline.

"Hey! Let's go! ...I think we need to do some low-altitude recon!"

"Nice excuse!"

That's right, thought the pilot as he operated the control column. Most of the fighter's movements were automated, but this time, it rapidly descended toward the urban area. This was now his own responsibility in more ways than one and he sent confirmation to control as if asking for ex-post-facto approval. And he did not bother waiting for a response.

"Let's go...!"

Just as he said that, he saw a light on his HMD.

The point of light indicated the ether reading of a witch. But...

...*What?*

The output was greater than the charging black dragon and it might have even rivalled the Black Witch's humanoid Device.

"There's a witch there!?"

Fleur stepped forward.

The city was being destroyed and the people would be kicked around at this rate.

But she knew who was commanding this.

“It’s Shouko...isn’t it?”

She wanted to believe otherwise. She wanted to think it was someone else and that Shouko wasn’t controlling them.

But she had another thought and she spoke it aloud.

“I was binding mama’s soul.”

She had not been controlling it, but her existence had definitely allowed her mother to remain in existence.

Shouko was the same. She had to be.

There had to be several factors supported by her presence.

“So maybe I have no right to say anything to Shouko now.”

But she remembered Horinouchi who had shed tears with her without feeling pity. She remembered Kagami who had taught her that her mother still existed.

And she remembered that Kagami had tried to stop Shouko. So...

“Someone...”

She no longer had any power.

And she was honestly afraid of using her power as a witch.

...I might lose something again.

But, thought her heart as it prioritized everything else over that.

Even if she had no power and was afraid...

“I won’t let myself lose anything anymore...!”

She made up her mind. She did not know if she could use her power, but she stood to face the approaching black dragon.

“I won’t lose...!”

Just as she cried out and prepared to fight, something ran between her and the charging dragon.

It was a flower dragon. Specifically...

“Mama’s servant!”

While Mary’s annihilation spell barrier and Hunter’s attacks took care of the multitude of enemies falling from the sky, Hunter realized the overall flow of battle was moving toward the urban area.

The river from the sky was beginning to avoid her and Mary.

They were still above the ocean near the coast of Kamakura, but from there they could receive the backup of the Horinouchi family on Enoshima. Hunter checked the surface deployment, enemy distribution, and predicted arrival points.

“Rank 3! Fire here...!”

...Dammit! She’s faster than my spell’s prediction!

Was that Mary’s ether detection sense? Since she had been top class in her own world, she was able to predict the flow of the enemy forces based solely on the ether distribution.

So Hunter fired a shot to both follow Mary’s instruction and to confirm the result from her own spell.

“Kh...!”

She felt like the enemy was more densely packed in.

They had descended like a waterfall before, but by bending that path, they wavered and their distribution grew a lot rougher. That left some less dense areas, but a gunner had to take the densest area into account, which was a real pain. Also...

...The city has got to be in real trouble!

She wanted to know what had happened to the evacuating people, but she

had heard transmissions were cut off. So as she fired...

“Dammit...!”

She felt the need to rush this.

She wanted to move forward. She had to crush the enemy and get Horinouchi to the Black Witch. After all, she had heard the Black Witch was preparing a barrier.

The surveillance footage from the sky confirmed that.

...What is she doing!?

Mary had fallen silent when it came to that question.

And that told Hunter the answer. The Black Witch was trying to erase this world.

Her position was dangerous. For their strategy, Shihouin Academy had become a ley line management area at the center of everything, but the Black Witch had taken up a position right in front of it.

If she placed a large barrier around Tokyo Bay, she could use Shihouin Academy as a focal point and access the entire world's ley lines.

After that, the Black Witch could install some kind of “destruction”, no matter how mundane, and her imagination would destroy the world.

So they had to stop her. That was why Hunter wanted to hurry, but...

“Rank 3! The waves of enemies are merging over Yokohama!”

...Are we not going to make it!?

Just as she thought that, she saw something.

A silhouette flew into the sky from Sakuragi-cho in western Yokohama.

No, it was not just the one. And not just a few either.

They were countless round black forms. The Black Witch's minions were launched skyward.

“Huh? A counterattack?”

Had we set up anything like that? wondered Hunter as something else

appeared.

It was a flower.

It was a giant Magino Device with six flower petals connected together in a circle.

“...Is that Fleur!?”

Fleur felt no fear.

She had the flower dragon’s assistance and she had successfully summoned Zephyr. But the flower dragon was simply creating a “framework” to assist her ether management. The power overflowing from her simply would not stop.

...Wow.

She had always thought her mother was amazing. She had thought her mother was summoning Zephyr and using the environment spell when Fleur wanted her to.

But that was incorrect.

Her mother had only been controlling and adjusting Fleur’s power.

It was Fleur who had the power.

And that was what scared her. This was different from the fear she had felt of that black dragon. She was afraid she would not be able to do it right and she was afraid she had enough power for her to lose everything.

Without this power, she probably would not have lost her mother. But...

“—————”

The flower dragon stood at her feet.

That was the one that had left her mother’s grave.

And it had come to her now.

...Yes.

Her mother would not come back. But she had a servant which had accepted her as her mother’s heir. So...

“Let’s go, mama.”

Her mother existed within her power. Her mother existed within what she needed to do. This was not control or bondage; the two of them coincided. So...

“Watch this.”

The fighter that flew past her sent information on her surroundings to her spell circle. That support information from the US military told her that someone else was beyond the descending enemies to her right and a little behind her.

There was only one thing she needed to do.

“She’s the same as me.”

That person had cried when Fleur had lost her mother.

And there was another person who she had recently gotten to know.

Her duty was to bring those two together. If she was going to blow away everything – both walls and enemies – then...

“Zephyr! ...Whip up the wind! The wind of flowers!”

...Fleur?

Shouko felt like she heard a voice.

It sounded like someone calling out to her from the distance, but all she could see was a flower as large as her Satanic Frame.

The flower was blossoming with petals that then danced through the air. The multitude of flowers and petals became a great gale.

“———!”

Everything touched by or surrounded by them subsequently exploded.

Shouko was impressed that the flower petals did not destroy the city as the air currents carried them around. When they were about to hit a building, the wind would whip up and they would avoid the building, slip below elevated structures, and fly back up again.

The only things destroyed were Shouko's reinforcements.

The black minions altered their descent trajectory and some of them fought back with their breath or Demon Eye Cannon, but they could not hope to match the great number of petals. Also...

...The main cannon!

As the giant flower approached, a thick beam of light fired from the peak at its center.

Fleur approached while typing at her many spell circles like they were a musical keyboard.

Her main cannon was smashed by a slash from the giant Device's right arm. But in that moment, the arm within the black dress was definitely destroyed. It instantly regenerated, but this proved it was not indestructible.

Whip up the wind, send down the flowers, and hurry your heart.

To be honest, she had felt a cold sweat dripping down her body for a while now. She innocently realized just how powerful and amazing her mother had been for being able to control this much power.

Zephyr was already having trouble maintaining the connection between the six pieces.

...Was it too soon to go all out...!?

She could only answer that in the affirmative. But she had moved the front line away from the people evacuating behind her and she had destroyed the central portion of the Black Witch's reinforcements.

"Shouko!"

If her main cannon could reach her, then so could her will.

"Shouko...!"

There was one thing she understood: what Shouko wanted through becoming the Black Witch.

It was what they had discussed the day before and it was what Shouko was doing now. Also...

...There's something I can understand when I think of her as if she's the same as me.

That was...

"Shouko! You want to be destroyed, don't you!?"

Mary listened to Fleur's voice arriving at her spell circle.

"You came to destroy a bunch of worlds, right? And here you've finally shown yourself! Why!? If destruction is the world's destiny and your goal, then there's no reason for you to appear here!"

That's right, thought Mary.

She could destroy the world through her minions or in another form, like she had in Mary's world.

So why had she appeared as herself in this world? Fleur explained: "You must be blaming yourself! The world you created with your imagination is going to fall into ruin and you blame yourself for that! So you had a thought! If what you imagined will be destroyed by your imagination, then you too can be destroyed by your imagination!"

Meaning...

"If what you imagined uses a power that surpasses your own imagination, then the creation will have surpassed its creator. And you feel you should be destroyed by that."

...In that case...

"Does the Black Witch think this world might pull that off!?" exclaimed Mary.

What had caused her to think that?

"Was it the attack power!?" asked Hunter.

"Oh, it probably was!" agreed Mary.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions!” protested Horinouchi.

She just scolded us. But at the same time, Fleur had gotten quite close.

Her flower storm was filled with explosive blasts as her Magino Device began to fall apart on its own.

“Shouko...! Open your eyes!”

She fired all six main cannons while sweeping them around by spinning her Device.

Shouko decided to give Fleur’s words some thought. However...

...That’s right.

What was she supposed to think about? She could not come up with anything. She tended to reject things, so she was probably trying to reject what the girl was saying, but “that’s right” was all that came out. But...

“Shouko. ...If that is your intent, I will accept your defeat.”

She realized her expression lost all strength when she heard Amaze express its understanding.

Was she surprised? But...

“—————”

She pulled out the sword stabbed into the earth. Then she stepped forward with a smile on her lips.

...Fleur.

She had pulled out the sword which had been forming the barrier to erase the world.

Let’s make that my indirect answer, she thought while silently swinging the blade.

She sliced through the six beams of light and then...

“Thank you.”

She sliced through Fleur’s flower from straight ahead.

I got through to her, thought Fleur.

She was the Black Witch, but she was also Shouko. She was acting as the Black Witch here, but the true will lay deep inside that.

“Don’t be dumb.”

As the greatest form of penance, Shouko was letting her creation destroy her if it would surpass her.

And so she was essentially saying this:

“ ‘I can just stop myself?’ ”

You’re wrong.

Mama and I are different, even if we seem so similar.

“There is someone who seems a lot like you, but they aren’t you!”

Fleur could see the space that her flower storm and six sweeping main cannon blasts had cleared of enemies. A group had managed to fly into that gap.

The Black Witch had moved forward to attack Fleur. Her giant Device had turned from Sakuragi-cho and toward Fujisawa to the west, but the three Magino Devices were approaching from the north, with Yokohama behind them.

Their position would push the Black Witch toward the sea off of Kamakura.

Fleur fell through the air as she watched the three Magino Devices set up that situation.

She held the flower dragon in her arms.

...Good!

Everything had looked hopeless, but she had rearranged it into a direct confrontation.

Her mother was probably smiling. So...

“The rest is in your hands...!”

Chapter 12: Come Below the Moon

Chapter 12

“Come Below the Moon”



The destination of acceptance
Is a much more important crossroads
Than a home to return to

The destination of acceptance

Is a much more important crossroads

Than a home to return to

Shouko saw her enemy.

...Three of them!

She had researched the higher Rankers. After returning home from the family restaurant the night before, she had spent the time after waking up on research.

The people who had competed with her sister were now trying to defeat her just like her sister.

And those three all held the possibility of surpassing her imagination.

Since Fleur had left the rest in their hands, they must understand her circumstances.

That was fine.

She was mentally prepared for the possibility that she would be defeated by them.

She was also mentally prepared for the possibility that they would be no match for her.

Either way, something would be destroyed.

This was the perfect night for destruction.

This world contains the possibility of surpassing my imagination and I am fighting back with the power to manifest my imagination.

This is the world I created versus me.

My sister has been silenced.

So it's only me.

Every part of me will settle things with myself. That is for the best.

When I defeated my sister, I placed a curse on her. Whether I am about to lose or win, that will count as the “Part 1 Ending” for this world and she will be excluded from it.

She will be sent back to our original world.

And I will either be destroyed or move on to destroy the next world.

That is for the best.

So I will face them. The sea is behind me and the city of Kamakura is at my feet. I remember the anmitsu at the Japanese café by the station being good.

But come to think of it, I probably stepped on it earlier. It was probably on my way here...

“Shouko! Shouko!” shouted Amaze. “You’re looking kind of down, but is it their fault!?”

“Hmm, only extremely indirectly, but kind of, yeah.”

Well, whatever. I can see the enemy. That’s the Rank 2’s Ira, right? That annihilation spell Magino Frame is out front and that over there is America’s Hedgehog. And that’s the Akerindou paired with my sister in the buddy system.

She could perceive it all.

Good, she thought as she pointed her sword forward.

“Bring it on.”

As soon as she said that, a blow struck her Satanic Frame at a somewhat diagonal angle from behind.

It was a missile strike from the ocean.

“Did it hit!?”

Song Café got up from the deck as the report from the observation fighters and confirmation via satellite came in.

She stood up and checked the details on her spell circle.

...So two out of five hit!

A cruiser had launched high-speed cruise missiles. The warheads were purely physical to slip past the enemy's ether detection. After ascending and accelerating using the swing-by method, they had shut off their propulsion partway through their descent.

The fleet had calculated a position out at sea that could not be seen from the battlefield thanks to the curvature of the earth, but...

"Who would have thought the enemy would produce something 3km tall?"

They were glad they had received that information yesterday. That had allowed them to move the fleet out of view even from an altitude of 3km.

And their attack had made it through.

It was not as powerful as a blow from the Hedgehog, but it had to have done damage to the 3km Frame.

Then...

"All ships fall back!"

On A-un Silver Coin's orders, all ships in view opened up their side hulls with the assistance of ether light. As soon as they took their accelerated cruising forms and confirmed their respective destinations, light flew toward them.

...So she isn't going to let us escape, is she!?

Picture-perfect lightning descended from the deserted sky where the moon hung.

Song Café smiled at the thick glowing projectiles that raced across the ocean's surface in search of them. A-un Silver Coin was using her management spell to control the entire fleet's accelerated cruising, so Song Café...

"Ha ha...!"

She laughed and used her café menu spell circle to order defense spells for all the personnel and ships. She also ordered something else while she was at it.

...Will this make it in time!?

She did not know, but there was something else she did know.

"Our attacks can reach you. And that means you aren't invincible, Black

Witch!”

Shouko laughed as she sensed her lightning attack hit the target in the ocean.

“Ha ha...”

Her Satanic Frame’s back armor had been lightly damaged. Two out of five missiles had hit. The remaining three had broken apart in midair and burst into light, but they had probably been on a timed fuse.

That meant they had calculated the timing of the hit mere moments beforehand. If she had taken just one step differently, this would have turned out differently.

The two missile hits had moved her giant Device slightly forward.

She could repair the back armor. In fact, she already had.

She could simply view this as a side show before the main battle, but...

“Good.”

“N-no, this is not good,” said Amaze.

“Oh, yes it is. ...I hadn’t imagined that.”

“Well... I feel more like you weren’t cautious enough and got careless.”

“You can only be careless about what you didn’t imagine. Because that means you didn’t think about it.”

Meaning...

“Let it surprise you and you lose.”

“That certainly is simplistic.”

With that, she faced her enemy. The three Devices were in front of her.

“Now, let’s get this started.”

A moment later, five shots flew in from behind her again.

They sure are immature...! seriously thought Hunter just before the hit.

She had lost her connection to the 7th Fleet. She had thought there was nothing they could have done about the Black Witch's attack, but she also felt like they would do something about it. And even if there *was* nothing they could do, she still felt like they would do something about it.

They had not spent the last ten years just sitting around. They could take care of themselves.

But at that timing, they should have been withdrawing. Those missiles had their trajectory inputted in advance, but they had still managed to fire them along a surefire trajectory while withdrawing.

Whether it was a surprise attack or not, they considered any kind of hit to be a win.

But Hunter saw a movement in front of her.

The Black Witch's giant Device had turned to the right.

It was not worth asking when she had done that. The sword tip which had been pointed toward Hunter's group was now raised overhead in one arm.

It was a natural movement, but that was what made it so hard to read. Was it her imagination that let her do that?

But that raised sword had another purpose.

As the black blade rotated behind her back, it erupted with a flame-like black light.

"That will not work a second time."

Sure enough, the power exploded.

Just like before, two of the five should have hit, but those two were burned and detonated by the black flames.

The remaining three overshot the giant Device and detonated in empty air, but...

...They missed!?

They had not hit, so Hunter moved forward.

She started the Hedgehog forward.

“Let’s go, Kagami’s sister...!”

...Am I overthinking this if I view it as a personal attack!?

Shouko clenched her teeth more as herself than as the Black Witch.

Her opponents were the witches of this world, so they would see her as the Black Witch. And yet...

“Why is she referring to me as my sister’s sister...!?”

“Isn’t that an accurate description?”

This book needs to be quiet.

But it seemed her first opponent would be the American Representative. They might have been letting the lower ranked ones go first. The missiles had been from America as well. But when she raised her sword to the right and stepped forward to intercept...

“Eh?”

She had thought the American Representative’s Magino Device had moved forward.

But it had not.

When they had first appeared, she had seen three Magino Devices. From front to back, they had been arranged Ira, Hedgehog, and Akerindou.

But now there were only two. What did that mean?

“It can’t be...”

It arrived before she could look back.

It was behind her.

Ira suddenly appeared behind the giant Device and it collided with it at full power.

Mary had understood what America was setting up.

They had repeated the same material with the missile attack. Just beforehand, a text-only spell circle had arrived from the Rank 3 behind her:

“A second attack is coming.”

She had thought that was ridiculous.

It was true the high-speed cruise missile attack had hit the first time, but...

...This is the Black Witch we're talking about!

She had the power of creation and she had originally wanted to be an author.

Repeated material would not work on her.

But the Rank 3 would have known that. They all had the same information and they had come to a consensus on their interpretation of that information.

So why had the Rank 3 sent her that spell circle?

Her doubts had been resolved with the arrival of another spell circle:

“Shooting you from the pole worked, didn't it?”

Mary had gasped at that.

The second attack had yet to happen, but it would be happening soon. And in that tense situation, she understood just how much the Rank 3 trusted her.

There was something she alone could do.

...She'll have predicted that we'll think she won't expect a second attack.

The Black Witch was clever. A second attack wouldn't work on her. So what were they to do?

“A truly unexpected third attack...!”

Mary used her ability.

Her annihilation spell could do more than destroy and cut things. It could slice through space itself and let her fly into the opening.

“Which lets me move...!”

She did it at extreme close-range during the second attack.

In the instant the Black Witch was dealing with the repeated attack...

...Rank 3!

The Rank 3 moved forward. Mary moved back as if to use her as a shield and she narrowed down her annihilation spell and sent it behind a nearby building so it would not be detected.

“————”

And she made the leap.

Shouko realized they had entered new territory with this double-repeated material.

It was the same as a running gag. You could use it once and then twice, but after the second time showed that it would not work any longer, you used something else for the third time.

...Like a falling washtub!

This time, it was Ira. While it was not a washtub, the Magino Device was just as Ira-tating.

Looking back, the American Representative calling her “Kagami’s sister” had been setting this up. Calling her that had forced her to focus on that girl.

“And that created a slight opening...!”

“Isn’t that your fault for falling for it so badly!?”

Shut up. But the enemy’s action was clear. Stepping forward to strike the American Representative’s Magino Device had been a mistake.

As Ira stabbed into her from behind, its thrust pushed her giant Device forward.

...Kh!

Ira was not shaped for high speed. That might change if it had a bundled acceleration system, but each of the nine scythes used its own individual thrusters.

...But this type is more stable and has greater torque!

That proved accurate.

Shouko tried to swing her body to the left and right, but the nine scythes adjusted their thruster output as if steering her. In the worst cases, her movements had the opposite effect and were used to push her further forward.

In that case, she thought while swinging the giant Device's arm inwards. She slammed its sword behind her.

The nine scythes digging into her had no way to evade, but...

"Don't move!!"

Just as the enemy barked that warning, both her giant Device's arms were severed.

Shouko was aware how confused she was.

She knew her opponent could use an annihilation spell. The European U.A.H. Representative she had fought earlier had used spatial cutting and Shouko's giant Device had specialized defenses against it.

It used an ether bending defense.

Instead of being solid or absorbing the shock, it sped up the flow of ether on the surface so any ether attack would be deflected away.

Any damage done by attack power such as shells could be immediately repaired, but spatial cutting and annihilation would leave a "mold" in that space for a short period of time afterwards.

Of course, even simple kinetic energy would create a "mold" and if it damaged her, it would leave its traits in her "mold".

But spatial cutting and annihilation altered ether in a much more powerful way. The traits they left on one's "mold" were much more powerful.

They worsened the area's omen, which made it harder to create or recreate things there.

Thus, she deflected the ether away so it would not affect her "mold".

“Was she too close!?”

She was fortunate the enemy’s attack took the form of a scythe. The attack had needed to circle in from the outside, so it had only severed her arms. A sword would have split her torso.

...I can manage without the arms!

Think of it like that. And imagine a countermeasure, she told herself.

At the same time, she managed to look out ahead.

A lot was going on behind her, but that was not all.

“I told you to attack me all at once, didn’t I!?”

She remembered. And they would be doing exactly that. That meant it was not the Magino Device behind her she needed to focus on. It was...

“The American Representative...!”

The giant Magino Device looked like a shield and a high-speed shot was fired toward its wide-open lower chest.

“Will it hit...!?”

Koutarou’s asked his question as the attack pierced the air on its way toward the Black Witch’s giant Device.

...How did it turn out!?

This shot had been fired after Mary restrained her and kept her from resisting.

It was on course for an absolute bull’s-eye, so its path connected the two Devices.

“American Representative!” shouted the Head Maid. “Ready a second shot!”

Her imagination only took an instant.

Shouko had not expected this, but she had a flash of insight.

It concerned the whereabouts of the arms that Ira had severed.

The arms alone were larger than the enemy Magino Devices, but...

“Too bad.”

She held the Normal Device which acted as a controller.

And it was connected to...

“This can move as a Magino Device all on its own.”

The flying black sword stabbed in front of her as a shield.

At nearly 3km long, it was larger than the standalone Magino Device, but its functions were identical. So she only had to move it like she did in the Magino version.

“Its aim is accurate.”

With a pleasantly solid sound, light flashed beyond the standing sword.

A moment later, the scenery between the sword and her opponent grew distorted and the night grew all the darker.

“Too bad.”

The bursting shockwave tore apart and blew away the city below as if crushing, ripping, and piercing it.

...I missed!?

Hunter watched from atop the Hedgehog as the blast tore up the surface and tossed the buildings and natural crust into the air.

Light shined below her in a graph paper layout.

The defense spell cast on the land for Hexennacht had activated to endure and weaken the shockwave.

Of course, it was not powerful enough to stop a wide-range impact on the level of a natural phenomenon, but it activated to weaken the shockwave and adjusted the output of each small unit of area to ensure the damage did not spread elsewhere.

Light covered the ground and the wind exploded.

The first thing visible beyond the power and light was a sword.

And that was not all.

Regenerated giant black hands held the enormous sword's hilt.

That pair of decorated hands held the sword aloft.

...She's unharmed!?

That had to have worn her down some, but it had not reached the level of damage.

The giant Queen-style Device swung one arm around to smash Ira away with an elbow, and...

"I'll deal with you first...!"

She took an instant step into the light.

...She's fast!

The 3km colossus could apparently move at a scaled speed twice that of a human.

Its full body broke through the lingering shockwave and turbulence to arrive within three steps of the Hedgehog.

Hunter moved back at full speed.

"This isn't over yet...!"

Everything in that airspace shook and roared and Hunter focused on preserving herself as she fell back.

The Hedgehog was designed to withstand the high mobility of the swing-by method, so it could easily resist an explosive blast on this level.

So what was she going to do from here?

"Hunter!"

A sudden transmission arrived from the 7th Fleet. She assumed they were going to ask about her situation, but...

“Get her!!”

She reflexively smiled.

And she made up her mind. She opened the Device’s muzzle even in this gale, and...

“What do you think I’m doing...!?”

She raised her eyebrows and bellowed that while the Black Witch’s giant Device raised its sword to mid-level and then swung it down at her.

This attack used the blade near the guard rather than at the middle. It was an ideal attack using the sharpest part of the blade.

Shouko gave an instruction while she swung her sword.

“Find Akerindou!”

When stepping forward, she had made sure to keep her eyes on the enemy beyond the explosive blast and light.

So she had seen that Akerindou had disappeared.

...That annihilation spell!

This was the same thing Ira had used earlier. It had likely been done on Ira’s guidance. And that had sent Akerindou outside of her range.

The most dangerous location was behind her.

Ira’s annihilation spell had left a “mold” in space there. So it was possible Akerindou could have used the same path as Ira’s annihilation spell.

That would be why Ira had let itself be torn away without continuing the pursuit.

If the multi-scythe Device had self-destructed, the explosion of ether light would act as cover for Akerindou when it appeared there.

But if it was not behind her, what would she do?

...If I step forward, she can’t take aim!

So she did just that. She could leap forward and slice through the American

Representative's Hedgehog.

By doing that, this would no longer be a many-against-one battle.

So that was what she did.

The Hedgehog had activated its main cannon to resist her.

But it was too slow.

And even if it did fire its main cannon, the shell would be split by her sword's blade.

As she swung down the sword, the guard end dropped down first and everything above it would reach the Hedgehog.

The sharpest part would slice the Magino Device and the heavy guard would defend her.

This would work.

The only thing left to worry about was Akerindou's location.

If it did not simply appear in the same airspace Ira had appeared in before...

...Even further back!?

Akerindou was a sniper type. A bit more range would not have a significant effect on its power.

So she decided to move from this spot immediately after launching this sword strike.

"Eh...?"

But then the color vermilion filled her vision.

The vermilion resembled both a bird and a dragon. It was a bow-shaped Magino Device.

She had suddenly located Akerindou which had remained unseen until now.

It was not behind her, to the side, or far away in the distance.

It was quite close by. And...

"Behind the Hedgehog!?"

Akerindou's location had not changed.

It had used the annihilation spell to disappear, but it had remained in the exact same airspace.

...That means...

Hunter realized she had successfully coordinated with Hunter and with Horinouchi.

It seemed those two had also understood the series of events that had begun with the 7th Fleet's missile attack.

After all...

"This was the combination of everything that defeated us...!"

First, they had pushed from behind the enemy and fired a sniper shot there.

And when that missed...

"I used my Device as an extra acceleration barrel to strengthen Akerindou's shot!!"

They had been assisted by Mary's annihilation spell.

It had been used to move Akerindou.

Except that was only a feint to make the enemy think that had happened.

Because Mary had used her annihilation spell to circle behind her, the Black Witch had been wary of them repeating that material.

Would Akerindou appear behind her, on the way there, or somewhere else entirely?

Mary successfully severing her arms had increased her caution.

But they had not done that.

Akerindou had been in its original location. It had entered the annihilation spell, but it had not moved.

And Akerindou was about to repeat some other material.

It was the method once used to defeat Hunter.

Akerindou's ultra-close-range sniper shot was further accelerated. Hunter knew the timing perfectly since she had been hit by it.

"Get her...!"

She felt the Hedgehog falling apart as the attack passed by directly below her and was launched further forward.

Mary watched the scene from atop Ira after it was smashed and torn away.

Ira was mostly destroyed. The explosion of air from impacting this airspace would be enough for it to fall apart.

And just as the Hedgehog fired while being destroyed from within, an ether explosion erupted between them.

The spreading blast formed several rings of ether light which all sliced the air.

"———"

The light was so bright that Mary shielded her eyes with a hand and that extreme light filled the space.

The explosion spread as if to consume anything and everything.

"Did I shoot her...!?"

Horinouchi did not bother with her follow-through movement even though a light-blocking spell automatically appeared in front of her face.

The shot had been passed through Hunter's acceleration and then reached their opponent.

It had been a solid hit. After all, the projectile had scored a direct hit without even breaking through the sword first. That had been obvious from the sensation and the "pause" before the hit.

So...

"What happened to the Black Witch...!?"

With that, she looked forward and past the Hedgehog which shattered and split in two along the central line.

And both inside and outside that abundant storm of ether light...

“She’s gone...”

The Black Witch’s giant Device was not there.

It had disappeared.

Chapter 13: I Shall Shoot the Shadow

Chapter 13

"I Shall Shoot the Shadow"



Face forward
Face your target
There are no dreams
Where there are no enemies

Face forward

Face your target

There are no dreams

Where there are no enemies

Hunter felt herself relax.

An enemy large enough to block her view had existed within that unending dance of scattering light shards.

But now there was nothing there and only the ether light whirled around in a city-sized vortex.

“Not yet!”

A voice rang over her spell circle. It was not from the 7th Fleet. It was from Mary.

The girl’s next line told her this was a pressing issue that required top priority.

“Elsie Hunter!!”

She used Hunter’s name.

Horinouchi realized three things happened nearly simultaneously.

The first was Hunter’s nearly-destroyed Hedgehog entering a forced ascent.

...*Eh?*

Before she could wonder why, a line of black pierced through the sky.

The high-speed shot looked a lot like flames, but it suddenly changed direction in midair.

“Hunter!”

It scored a direct hit on the Hedgehog. No, Hunter made sure it did.

Horinouchi understood. The black cannon blast had flown in from far ahead and it had been targeting her.

Most likely, Mary had intercepted it during her descent. She had not been able to actually hit it, so she had reaped and bent the area of space it would pass through.

It had remained on a path toward Horinouchi, so Hunter had taken the hit instead.

“Horinouchi...! It’s okay!!”

She wanted to answer “what is?”, but she was not sure she could after seeing something far beyond Hunter.

A figure stood above Sagami Bay off the coast of Kamakura.

The moonlit figure’s armor was broken and clothing was torn, but...

“————”

Black light raced from the ocean and repaired the standing colossus. The damaged areas, the lost portions, and the broken materials were all repaired. It swung the sword it held to test its strength.

“The Black Witch...!”

She was not unscathed. But...

“That wasn’t enough to defeat her!?”

“It can’t be! Lady Mitsuru’s attack couldn’t destroy her!?”

“Not even Lady Mitsuru’s attack power was enough!?”

“If Lady Mitsuru’s attack isn’t enough, then nothing in the world is!”

“That’s fairly insulting to Lady Mitsuru, you know!?”

Shouko briefly did not understand herself.

...I’m not sure.

She had come to destroy the world because she felt she needed to be rebuked.

But if the product of her imagination would rebuke her, she wanted them to surpass her, the one who had imagined them.

But she nevertheless continued to resist them. She thought that was because she lacked the guts to accept that rebuke.

...I'm not sure.

If she had just accepted it, it would have all been over.

But she had resisted.

The method was simple. She had pulled back the sword she had been swinging toward the Hedgehog.

She had fortunately been prepared to move at a moment's notice due to her wariness concerning Akerindou's appearance.

She had pulled her body and the sword backwards and then slammed her power against the incoming shell.

The Magino Device main cannon was fired from the length of the sword and she had used that for a close-range collision as she fell back.

The power had collided and the blade had shattered.

But the shell had exploded and knocked her backwards as she tried to move back.

The next thing she had known, she was standing in Sagami Bay. However...

"Amaze."

She was still standing, but that attack had been quite effective. Reacting to it and repairing afterwards had required a lot of her resources.

She was worn out.

But there was one thing she knew even in this situation.

"I can still imagine this."

"Shouko. ...To be honest, this is dangerous."

"Really?"

"Your imagination might be fine, but the rules of this world are cornering

you.”

With that, Amaze displayed a spell circle before her eyes. Her ether temperature was displayed on a cage-like decoration.

That was her Phlogiston Heart.

The black pulse was full of cracks and close to shattering.

...Oh, I get it.

The Satanic Frame was fine as the Black Witch, but...

...They're starting to surpass me.

She had the clearly unfair power of imagination and creation, but she was still being cornered.

The Phlogiston Heart was more than just the heating of a witch's ether. It was the strength of her heart.

She had power and she could repair any wounds, but her heart was accepting that her opponent was reaching her level.

“I wonder what happens if my Phlogiston Heart breaks.”

“At the very least, you will lose your powers as a witch until it recovers.”

Meaning...

“You will lose your power of imagination and creation as the Black Witch...and our bond will be temporarily severed. Because our ability as a witch has been written into the framework of this world's rules.”

Horinouchi saw the enemy beyond the ether shards that blew through the air like spring flowers.

She was undamaged and her power far surpassed Horinouchi's. But...

...Is she tired?

No. That was not it.

She seemed to just be standing there, but that was due to Horinouchi's intense focus. The shattering pieces of the Hedgehog appeared to be falling in

slow motion, so everything appeared frozen before her eyes, just like the target immediately before she fired.

Her mind was clear.

And she realized that the Black Witch indeed did not move right away and was probably creating a slight “pause” before her next action.

That gap was not due to exhaustion. Nor was it due to carelessness, resignation, anger, or hesitation.

“Is it relief...?”

She had likely realized something and reached a certain conclusion after drawing out all her strength, dodging, attacking, breaking, and recovering it all.

On top of that, Horinouchi thought about the girl named Kagami Shouko that Fleur had told her about.

...A girl who wanted to stop herself.

Were they her children? No, they might be distant descendants, but they would not be her direct creations.

And now they were fighting evenly with her.

What would happen if she was bound by the Phlogiston Heart rule?

She could secure an endless supply of ether and repair any damage, but her Phlogiston Heart reflected her will to fight and her willpower. If she really did want what Fleur claimed she did...

“You understand now, don’t you?”

They had already proven something here.

“We can fight on your level or even higher.”

She gestured toward everything around her.

“So this is the correct answer.”

Shouko nodded.

...That’s probably true.

She could not help but understand something as she was driven into a corner and tried to reverse what had happened.

She *could* reverse what had happened, but the fact that she had to meant they had gotten the upper hand here.

Her own imagination had surpassed her as her enemy. She had somehow managed to recover, but...

...That doesn't erase the fact that they outdid me.

She might be able to erase the fact from her mind, but it would not erase the actual fact.

In that case, this was enough.

This world had surpassed her.

I can stop myself.

Yes.

That's right.

This is enough.

However...

"I haven't been rebuked yet."

"Amaze," said the Black Witch. "How many worlds have I destroyed?"

"I lost count after two thousand."

"I see," said the Black Witch. "I see," she said again with a nod. "Then...they would probably want to know why I was treating this world so much better. Because I destroyed them. They would want me to be fair. ...They would want to know why I suddenly became such a good girl. If I'm to be rebuked, they would say the only correct answers are for me to destroy or be destroyed."

So the Black Witch faced dead ahead and spoke to the vermilion bow-user.

"How dare you...!"

She spoke the words that were correct for the Black Witch.

“How dare you...! How dare you try to break our creation...!”

Mary saw the giant Device standing in Mogami Bay swing its sword at high speed.

The blade launched the same pitch black attack that Mary and Hunter had stopped earlier.

“Miss Horinouchi!”

Her Ira was already broken and she had entered a descent that allowed her to land safely.

Hunter was the same, so there was nothing to protect Horinouchi.

And Horinouchi launched an attack.

A white arrow shell collided with the black shot.

Their effects canceled each other out.

...Are you serious!?

There was only one appropriate response to equaling one of the Black Witch’s attacks head-on: “Well done, Man-...nouchi!”

She had trouble deciding which name to use and screwed it up.

“Ohh...”

The Head Maid watched the ultra-precise shootout that had begun in the eastern sky.

It was nothing more than an intersection of cannon blasts.

But their method of defense was strange.

They negated the enemy’s shots with their own and then launched another shot of their own.

The Black Witch held up her sword, caught the light on the blade, and sent it flying back once the light turned pitch black.

Meanwhile, Horinouchi used simple rapid-fire to pierce the enemy's shells and get her own attacks through.

The high-speed rally drew the afterimages of several dozen ballistic paths between them and it all accelerated.

"Well done, milady!"

They raised their voices as one to praise their master.

Horinouchi sped up. Her opponent did the same in response. No, the Black Witch was raising her speed as high as she could imagine. In that case...

"I will show you the rapid-fire of someone with official training and practice...!"

"Well done! Well done indeed!"

Shut up, Hunter.

But there was one thing she came to understand here. Every part of her that had its beginnings in that night ten years ago would find its result in what happened tonight. She hoped that result would be a good one, but...

"————"

She focused. The high-speed back-and-forth left a trail of afterimages, but each individual light felt like the result of the last ten years.

"Time for the Serious Mode my mother taught me!"

She bared her right shoulder to lighten the arm nocking the arrows. The night breeze felt chilly on her skin.

"Here I go!"

She continued her rapid-fire.

Shouko felt satisfied.

"Amaze."

During the exchange of light and power, Amaze opened several spell circles.

They displayed the state of the battles and resistance occurring across Japan and all over the world.

Her reinforcements had already arrived all around the globe and the flames of war were spreading all over.

Cities were probably being destroyed and engulfed in flames while so very much was lost.

...That's right.

If she knew she could be rebuked, she could not just let it end like this. The worlds she had already destroyed would never allow it.

So she continued the exchange of power while watching the battles around the world.

...Yes.

The people were resisting her and what she had imagined. Some of them would probably fail, but the very act of resistance was a stark contrast to ten years ago.

She did not know if they could do it now, but she was certain this world could greatly surpass her imagination.

Constant resistance was a necessary part of imagining.

So they could overcome everything.

Some of them had the talent to surpass her imagination.

The entire world had evolved so it could surpass her imagination.

The common people could join together and surpass her imagination.

So what about me?

If this world surpasses me, will I be left behind?

"I'm not sure."

She did not know and she did not want to know. The answer might be different, but...

...Yes.

I had no talent.

My world fell apart.

I had no friends.

Where did I go wrong? Or was there some other answer for me?

But there was one way of escaping this anxiety.

“Amaze. If I do defeat this world...”

“Yes, I am prepared to create the next world.”

“I see,” she said before testing it out. Their speed was still rising, but it was still within what she could imagine. “Did you know? My power is almost identical to my sister’s. With the exception of Amaze.”

After descending to the surface, Hunter saw the rally overhead.

But suddenly, she saw the Black Witch’s giant Device reveal a certain trick.

The 3km Queen-style suddenly spread its arms to either side.

If that was all, it would have looked like some kind of pose.

But it was not.

The giant Device held a black sword in its right hand.

...Huh?

For a moment, Hunter thought there was something wrong with her eyes, but there was not.

The giant Device also held a black sword in its left hand.

“She duplicated it!?”

That was right. Other than the Book of Creation, the Black Witch had almost the same abilities as Kagami. Which meant...

“That’s cheating...!”

The Black Witch’s giant Device crossed its swords to block Akerindou’s

attacks. And then it swung both arms.

“...This ends here.”

The twin swords fired twin blasts. They were launched with slightly shifted positioning and timing and they flew straight toward Akerindou.

They were moving far too fast to dodge and the two attacks on different paths could not both be negated.

And they were both on a collision course.

Horinouchi was prepared to take a hit.

The best choice was probably to activate a three-arrows defense and stop both shots. But...

...That shield can't cover a wide enough area!

She knew she could not afford to give up.

“...Heh.”

So she breathed a surprisingly optimistic bitter laugh. She made up her mind, faced the two incoming attacks, hurriedly fired and activated a defense spell, and...

“Who was it that turned me into such a positive thinker?”

As soon as she said that, she saw the Black Witch bring the two swords together after swinging them.

...Huh?

Horinouchi had assumed she was using the double swords to double the number of shots fired and number of responses required from Horinouchi, but that was not the case.

She brought the two blades together and swung both arms horizontally.

“She's firing with double power!?”

A shot with far greater speed flew toward her through the gap between the previous two.

Horinouchi was sure she had been hit.

She had hurriedly put together the three-arrows and fired a shot, but...

...I wasn't fast enough?

She heard the cacophony of impact and shattering armor. The atmosphere vibrated and ether light exploded.

She had been hit. There was no questioning that.

But something odd had happened. Other than the vibration in the air...

"...Eh?"

Akerindou was not shaking as it fell apart, it did not lose balance, and she felt no damage whatsoever.

She looked to her shoulder and saw the Suzaku had left its spell circle. The vermillion servant had gathered all its things in a cloth carried over its back, but it looked around and then at her.

"..."

It silently stepped back into the spell circle.

...Looks like you packed up for nothing. And how did you tie that cloth anyway? Well?

Anyway, Horinouchi could see no change.

Akerindou remained intact and, in a scene that seemed to be happening a lot lately, Kagami was there.

"Horinouchi, could you warn me next time if you are going to be firing your three arrows? It was horribly difficult finding the right timing to intervene and the shot deflected by your three arrows just about hit me, so it was just difficult all round."

"Well, um, but..."

She had no idea what was going on.

She only knew that something weird was happening. But that change was

probably so large that she was having difficulty seeing it all. So...

“Kagami...does anything here seem odd to you?”

“Good question, Horinouchi. We really should have saved the world and been done with all this by now, so what are we still doing out here?”

“That’s true,” said Horinouchi as she finally realized what it was.

She looked to Kagami in her Holy Knight outfit and to the sword Magino Device positioned vertically as a shield in front of Akerindou.

“Why are you heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeere!?”

Chapter 14: You Shall Cut the Light

Chapter 14

“You Shall Cut the Light”



The anger and resignation
Of having your many questions concentrated down to a single answer

The anger and resignation

Of having your many questions concentrated down to a single answer

Kagami thought deeply about Horinouchi's question.

...Why am I here?

It was a very philosophical question. And since Horinouchi had asked it, she could assume there was real meaning to the question. So...

"Horinouchi, wait just a moment."

"Is there any reason to wait?"

Show some patience. But this must mean she is expecting something of me. In that case...

"Could you give me a hint?"

Horinouchi responded by pointing behind Kagami. Kagami looked in that direction and saw the badly-destroyed city of Kamakura and...

"...Shouko."

That giant black humanoid Device stood there with two swords.

...I see.

She realized there were also battles being fought all around them. The Black Witch's minions continued to fall from the sky. The explosions of light and sounds of destruction were primarily to the west, but they were getting closer.

What did that mean?

"It would seem I arrived in time for the peak of the festival."

"Sorry about the wait, everyone. This is where things truly begin."

Horinouchi smiled bitterly at what Kagami said in the middle of the battlefield. That girl was as haughty as ever. But...

"You made us wait far too long, Kagami."

"Yes, and I feel bad. But my dream lasted a little long."

That was right. Kagami was supposed to be trapped in a “dream”.

“How did you escape the dream?”

“It was simple. I might have been asleep, but someone outside the dream woke me. ...Horinouchi, I heard your voice: ‘Help me, Kagamiii!’ Yes, it would have been an insult to the Kagami name if I had not answered your cry!”

“I said nothing of the sort.”

“Now, now. There is no need to be embarrassed, Horinouchi! I felt a squeezing in my chest when I heard your heart’s voice!”

“My heart didn’t say it either!” she responded, but she belatedly realized just how much Kagami must have been thinking about her.

Horinouchi was considerate enough to realize that. So...

“What will you do now, Kagami?”

“Well, first there is one thing I want to check on.”

Kagami pointed Dikaiosyne toward the Black Witch.

“Shouko.”

Horinouchi was not sure if the Black Witch would respond, but she did so.

“What? Don’t interfere.”

“I was just wondering what you had named that rip-off of a Frame you copied from Horinouchi’s mother. You might have said it before, but I haven’t had a chance to hear it.”

On Horinouchi’s spell circle, Hunter was holding up a spell circle with “Don’t provoke her!” written on it. *Oh, Hunter doesn’t know how to write that kanji. I know how.* But the spell circle also showed Mary moving her right hand in a circle to say “Wrap it up! Wrap it up!” and Horinouchi had to agree with her.

But after a breath, the response arrived.

“The Satanic Frame.”

She had said it. Shouko had definitely answered her sister. And her sister

tilted her head.

“Huh? One more time.”

“The Satanic Frame.”

“One more time.”

“The S-Satanic...Frame.”

“And what does that mean?”

“Eh? Um, uh, a Satan...ish Frame?”

“Shouko... Is the Black Witch the devil? No. She is not, is she? She is simply a witch decked out in all black, right? That is at best Queen-style. ...So why are you calling yourself satanic?”

Umm, she thought before realizing something.

“Wh-what does it matter!? That’s just how it works in this world! Isn’t that good enough!? Besides, what are you calling *your* big Frame!?”

Her sister discussed something with the shrine maiden witch. After a while, her sister gave the shrine maiden an OK gesture.

“This one is known as the Geo Frame.”

“Huh? Geo isn’t even an adjective. Besides, isn’t Geo an earth goddess? It’s true a Shinto shrine maiden will have local deities tied to the earth, but isn’t it weird to call it Geo?”

“Shouko...”

Her sister used her large sword as a staff and tilted her head.

“That is why you have hit your limit here.”

“Even after everything you told me about her,” said Amaze. “I didn’t realize just how unreasonable your sister is.”

“Right!? Right!? I wasn’t lying! Everything I said was true!”

“Actually, you might be about as bad as her...”

“Nooo! Not even this book will take my side!”

“Now, then,” said Kagami.

She had a lot of opinions here, but...

“Shouko. ...It is time to say goodbye to the Book of Creation there.”

“Huh? Why?”

It must have seemed sudden.

Kagami would not demand she part with the book. Nor would she force her to. She did not intend to wield her power as a sister. Forcing it with her authority would only lead to the girl relying on something similar in the future. Thus...

“You, Book of Creation. Amaze, was it? It seems you can speak with me here. This conversation should have shown you how unreasonable I am, and that will not change.”

“Are you saying you can sever the bond between Shouko and me?” asked the book. “Shouko wanted me. Even if you destroy her Phlogiston Heart and sever our bond using this world’s rules, that will only last until her Heart recovers. It will ultimately return to normal.”

“That’s right. This can’t be changed by force,” said her sister. “And I can’t beat you, Kagami. But when I’m with Amaze, I’m the Black Witch and she’s far more powerful than you.”

“So the question is how we can win,” said Kagami.

That sounded like a riddle, but...

“Kagami.”

Horinouchi stood next to her and raised her hand.

Kagami knew what she was going to do, so she took her hand.

“Our imagination will defeat the Black Witch, correct?”

“This is mostly due to your influence, you know?”

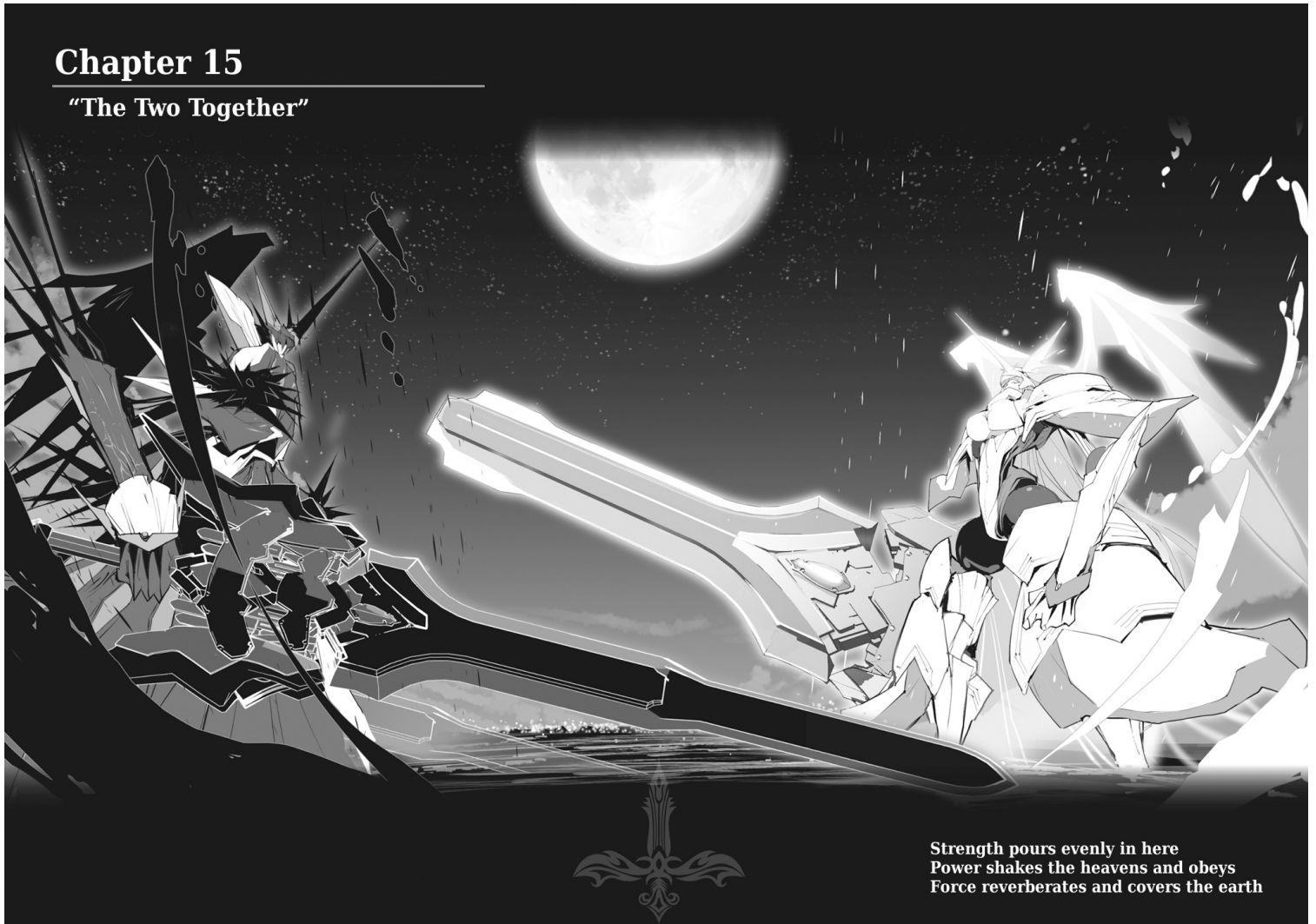
“Your heart belongs to you, Horinouchi.”

Horinouchi, smiled a little at that. And so they spoke in unison: “Summon...
Geo Frame!”

Chapter 15: The Two Together

Chapter 15

"The Two Together"



Strength pours evenly in here
Power shakes the heavens and obeys
Force reverberates and covers the earth

Strength pours evenly in here

Power shakes the heavens and obeys

Force reverberates and covers the earth

A great roar was reflected in the sky, permeated the land, and echoed back.

Across Japan, especially around Kantou, the people battling the Black Witch's reinforcements were worried about when the descent of enemies would end.

"Hey..."

They heard something like distant thunder in the sky and saw lightning in the

Tokyo region.

The witches exchanged words as they struck the black dragons and resisted despite being pushed back and destroyed.

“Do you know what these tremors and those flashes of lightning in the sky are?”

They did. Any witch here would understand.

The noise, light, and shaking reaching them had one thing in common.

“This is the rhythm of footwork and sword fighting.”

It all came from a battle.

Just like them, something colossal had turned the eastern land into the scene of a showdown.

The threat from the heavens continued to descend, the witches were hit and had their power taken, and there was no end in sight no matter how much of themselves they poured into the task. But...

“They’re fighting.”

Someone else was. Someone other than them. Some unknown person.

And that unknown someone was fighting for the same goal as them.

Where was the frontline?

That would be the showdown to the east, but...

“It’s here too!”

The witches responded to the actions of the unknown eastern witch that reached them like natural phenomena. Both the women and men did. And not just those in Japan. It spread to everyone who understood the situation due to the communications, ley lines, and exchange of divine protections.

“Keep resisting...!”

The battle continued.

Fight. Resist. There is no point in accepting defeat to the enemy before your eyes.

In the distance, someone was attempting to settle things with the Black Witch. With that in mind, they all matched their steps to the rumbling tremors, which provided a divine protection.

“No one’s going to complain if we show off and keep going tonight!”

“They’ll probably point out we’re too old for this, though.”

“Who cares? It’s like we only ever age once a decade anyway.”

The witches laughed. They laughed and resisted the enemy.

“Hexennacht is the night when everyone spends ten years together...!”

The battlefield had moved to Tokyo Bay.

Instead of the Uraga Channel, they were deep in the bay where Shihouin Academy was, so the field was approximately 20km across and the water was nearly 20m deep. That was plenty of space for two 3km Devices to move around.

The black and white opponents clashed.

The white sword collided with the twin black swords. Once the blade was blocked, they changed position and sent out another attack.

White sparks flew and black embers burst endlessly into the sky.

The giants and Hexennacht as a whole had disturbed the air currents, causing a meteorological oddity around Tokyo Bay. It began as thunder clouds rising over an area twice the size of the bay.

Lightning ran through the clouds, the din of clashing swords shook those dark clouds, and localized rain and lightning once more spread out through the sky.

The racing lightning sought somewhere to go, washed across the surfaces of the giant Devices, came to an end, and disappeared.

Three people danced amid it all.

Two were the witches holding hands on the chest of the giant white Device.

The third was the witch wielding two swords atop the chest of the giant black

Device.

They danced with a view that extended beyond each other and beyond even the entire battlefield.

Their gazes seemed to view the entire world and beyond.

They stepped, swung their bodies this way and that, and occasionally spun or paused.

“————”

They showed no fear even as lightning flashed around them and rain poured down on them.

“Kagami,” said one witch. “If we destroy her Phlogiston Heart, can we separate Shouko from the Book of Creation?”

“Yes. The book said so itself. Although it would be temporary.”

“Then we need to destroy the Book of Creation in that time. ...Right?”

“Well done, Horinouchi.” The other witch smiled but her expression immediately returned to normal. “Why is it everyone seems to know what I want more than I do? But in that case...”

That witch formed a sword between her and the witch holding her hand.

There was a Suzaku and a dragon on their shoulders.

They both placed a hand on the sword’s hilt and held it to support the blade.

“Here goes.”

“I will go even further than you.”

“Then...let’s go together.”

The two witches stepped forward on the stage.

After regrouping with Mary, Hunter was in the sky. She and Mary were both riding different fighters.

“It took them three steps to reach Tokyo Bay, but we aren’t so lucky...!”

They had a reason to go there and to pursue the others. But when they looked down from the sky...

“...Ohh...”

Central Kamakura had lost most of its buildings, so they had an excellent view of the battle in Tokyo Bay. The three people and two Devices continued their swordfight deep in the thunder clouds that obscured the view like a forest’s trees.

The sound of ether light sparks indicated that the giant black and white Devices were accelerating their clash. The density of attacks was far greater than when they had fought Hunter and Mary.

And Mary called over from the other fighter.

“Elsie Hunter! Down below...!”

“I see it.”

Something became apparent once they gained altitude.

There were fires on the surface and shards of ether light scattered like flower petals.

Several black figures moved through those areas and spread destruction, but there were also plenty of people resisting them, using their own power, saving people, and changing position.

And it was more than just unfamiliar witches. Even the normal citizens were among them.

They were not just fighting. If surviving was to resist destruction, then evacuation was another form of resistance.

And then Hunter realized something.

“Was my dad a part of this ten years ago?”

This was the same. It was the same as her father’s battlefield, the same as her father’s sky. She felt the same thing her father had.

Tokyo Bay spread out straight ahead. As they flew straight through the thunder clouds...

“Kagami, Horinouchi...!”

The giant white Device accelerated.

The twin black swords were deflected by the pommel and they spread out.

“Keep going...!”

Kagami knew their attack had hit.

Her sister’s blade had also hit them, but it only managed to scrape them.

Their attack had clearly broken something.

The black Satanic Frame’s right shoulder had obviously lost the spherical motor below the armor.

“The ‘mold’ from Mary severing the arm is still there!”

“I see,” said Kagami to praise her student.

After all, it was thanks to Mary’s consideration that she had been able to come here at all.

Lisbeth had said that Mary referred to her as “Second Headmaster” when she was fighting the Black Witch.

That had reminded Lisbeth of Shihouin Academy and of Kagami sleeping in the medical building. She had claimed Shihouin Academy might have been destroyed had she continued fighting.

Many factors had been necessary for Kagami to be here now.

“You have my thanks.”

With that, she continued attacking.

She knew what to target. Once they had caught her sister’s sword, they had to push forward, deflect the other sword with the pommel or guard, and...

“There...!”

Their attack reached the opposite shoulder from before.

It broke. The attack did not have much speed behind it, but it was a very

heavy sword.

Ether light fragments scattered, but the giant black Device...

“It isn’t working...!”

Instant regeneration returned the motor below the armor to normal. But...

“Kagami...!”

Kagami saw what Horinouchi meant.

On the giant black Device’s chest stage, her sister was raising twin swords and breathing heavily, but a book floated in front of her. That was...

“The Book of Creation...!”

“Amaze.”

Shouko tried to ask what the book was doing.

She wanted to say moving out in front was dangerous.

But she was too out of breath.

“You’ve pushed yourself too far, Shouko. ...I cannot imagine things like you can, but the things you imagine and create are accumulated inside me. So I can use that to support you.”

“You idiot.” She smiled bitterly. “That’s just like when we first met. You said, ‘I cannot imagine things like you can, but the things I have seen imagined and created are accumulated inside me. So I can use that to support your writing.’ ”

“Did I say that?”

“Sorry, I might have invented that memory.”

“Then I said it.”

Amaze smiled and faced forward. Or it seemed like it.

“Let’s do this,” it said.

The Satanic Frame moved forward. Shouko had not willed it to do so, but...

...I desire.

If I have accumulated within Amaze, then this is everything I have been until now.

And this is Amaze's judgment of me after watching me. That means I'm even more unrefined than I think I am.

"I desire, Amaze. ...Just like when we first met, I simply desire."

So...

"Let's hit them with all of 'our'-selves, Amaze."

"Yes," agreed Amaze. And: "Kagami...! Don't think imagination is enough to defeat our accumulated creation...!"

The Satanic Frame had briefly come to a stop, but Horinouchi realized it had accelerated once more.

...It's fast?

She added the question mark because she sensed no will behind their opponent's movements.

The motions were smooth, like something someone had practiced over and over.

"Kh...!"

They were now fighting a defensive battle. Kagami also seemed to understand what was happening with the attacks from the giant black Device and its twin swords.

"This is a combination of *katas*! ...None of it is new, but it is the same as us!"

"The same?"

"Even if it is nothing special, by combining enough of them together, it becomes something new."

Meaning...

"The Book of Creation does not have its own imagination, but it is trying to surpass the imagination inside it!"

The two Geo Frames crossed swords while moving around Tokyo Bay.

Their blades collided, but then the twin black swords both fired.

Each of the individual movements was something that had happened before.

But the timing and situation were different. What had previously only been trying to score a hit was being used as the optimal form of that motion.

The series of attacks was dense and unpredictable.

They fired at each other, they deflected each other's blades, and the black power roared.

"Kagami! Did you know this!? Shouko has envied you for a long, long time and she always wanted to defeat you one day!"

So...

"So I will make sure that happens...!"

Something changed with those words.

The entire giant black Device grew.

It grew to approximately 1.3 times its previous size. The great size did not create any kind of gap and the power and pressure grew with it.

"Do you understand!?"

The giant black Device raised its voice while swinging a truly impressive blade with even more force and speed than the white sword.

"That is her desire!" it said.

It split the thunder clouds, used its footwork to keep up with the giant white Device that slid to the side so that it would not be pushed back, and pummeled that white Device with two black blades.

"Do you understand!?" it asked again.

It continued while the twin black blades attacked without rest from multiple directions.

"To imagine is to desire! Imagination lies at the base of all forms of

affirmation – be it fame, money, pleasure, knowledge, or self-satisfaction!”

Do you understand?

“When comparing you to Shouko, Shouko has the far greater complex...!”

A sword strike knocked the white Device back to the edge of the bay.

Waves broke on the nighttime coast and the white giant just barely managed to remain standing while the black queen continued a calm march forward.

“We turn imagination into power, so you cannot defeat us...!”

But a voice responded to that announcement.

“So what?”

Two witches firmly held hands on the chest of the giant white Device.

The one wearing a Holy Knight-style Frame spoke.

“Let me make one thing clear.”

“And what is that!?”

“Well.” The witch smiled. “If you can only view imagination as power, then you are already obsolete.”

The giant black Device responded in two ways.

“————”

First, it fell silent. And then it began a mad dash straight forward.

...Evade!

Horinouchi wielded Dikaiosyne with Kagami and when they leaped, the Geo Frame moved as well.

Then the 1.3x-sized twin swords struck the space they had just vacated.

“That was a splendid evasion, Horinouchi!”

“I think the buildings in the Makuhari region were squashed flat!”

“Yes, my sister once went to Makuhari instead of Ariake because she mistakenly thought the event was being held there. This was probably an

indirect expression of anger over that.”

“There’s another attack coming!”

They ducked and a sword slash powerful enough to destroy a small island passed just above the Geo Frame’s head.

They stood up to take advantage of the opening after the enemy’s attack.

“Let’s go!”

She nodded and had Dikaiosyne interfere.

They moved forward.

After evading the one attack, they made an attack of their own before the next one.

The precise movements that even used the scattering thunder clouds as cover were a true tightrope walk.

But as they continued moving and using their entire body to evade and attack, Kagami spoke to her as if whispering.

“Horinouchi, this is where it ends. ...Fighting while protecting you and also being protected by you was truly worthwhile.”

Why are you saying this now? wondered Horinouchi, but she felt the same.

So as they dodged the enemy’s swords and the wind whipped up the bottom of her Form, she responded.

“...I feel the same. You taught me I didn’t have to do it all alone.”

“You have my thanks.”

Seeing Kagami’s smile, Horinouchi smiled back and nodded, but then they both faced forward.

“Let’s do this.”

An attack was swinging down from above, but they did not dodge it or knock it aside.

They bent their entire body like a bow and sent Dikaiosyne in from below.

“...!”

Dikaiosyne shattered at almost the exact moment the twin black swords were deflected.

“Huh...!?”

Shouko sensed danger in Amaze’s confusion.

Something beyond their imagination had occurred.

...They were willing to shatter their own sword to knock us off balance!?

The giant white Device stood before them with its arms spread wide, but it was unarmed.

Meanwhile, their arms were similarly spread wide, but they had a sword in each hand.

Their arms were positioned at about the right point for a mid-level sword strike, so Amaze would probably shift into exactly such an attack.

That meant they could still pull this off.

It was all thanks to Amaze increasing the Satanic Frame’s size.

She understood that Amaze was not trying to make attacks of its own but was replaying the motions found in what she had accumulated within it.

Since only the necessary attacks were made, there was no unnecessary effort and the attacks were light. They moved swiftly from one attack to another, but there was no weight to them.

That was why Amaze had grown the Satanic Frame to acquire the necessary weight.

It had also had a secondary effect on their reach and sturdiness.

Deflecting each other’s attacks had opened a space between them, but the Satanic Frame’s attacks could reach the enemy. And it was thanks to the growth that their swords had not broken even though the enemy’s had.

Shouko and Amaze had the upper hand.

There was only one area where the other side had an advantage.

“Amaze...!”

The exhaustion was intense.

Her head in particular was overheating from thinking about too many things.

But this was something only she could imagine.

“And I will do what I can!”

Her opponent’s advantage was her advantage. After all...

...My sister will remake the broken sword...!

Not repair, but remake it from scratch. And if they had created an opening in her Satanic Frame for that...

“I’ll take it for myself!”

Shouko pulled in the ether from the destroyed Device.

She had the greater power because she had Amaze. So if she secured her sister’s ether light and used it to repair her Satanic Frame and the twin swords...

“You’re out of weapons, Kagami...!”

Once she shouted that, she saw two straight lines.

...Eh?

They were two paths cutting through the sky from southwest to northeast.

They were fighters. F-23s. *Wow, they’re just like I designed them*, she thought as they passed between the giant white Device’s spread arms. And they launched two figures.

“It can’t be...!”

Hunter spread her arms toward the sky as she fell along with Mary.

“Take this! And...”

“Please go get ‘em, Brigadier General! Miss Horinouchi!”

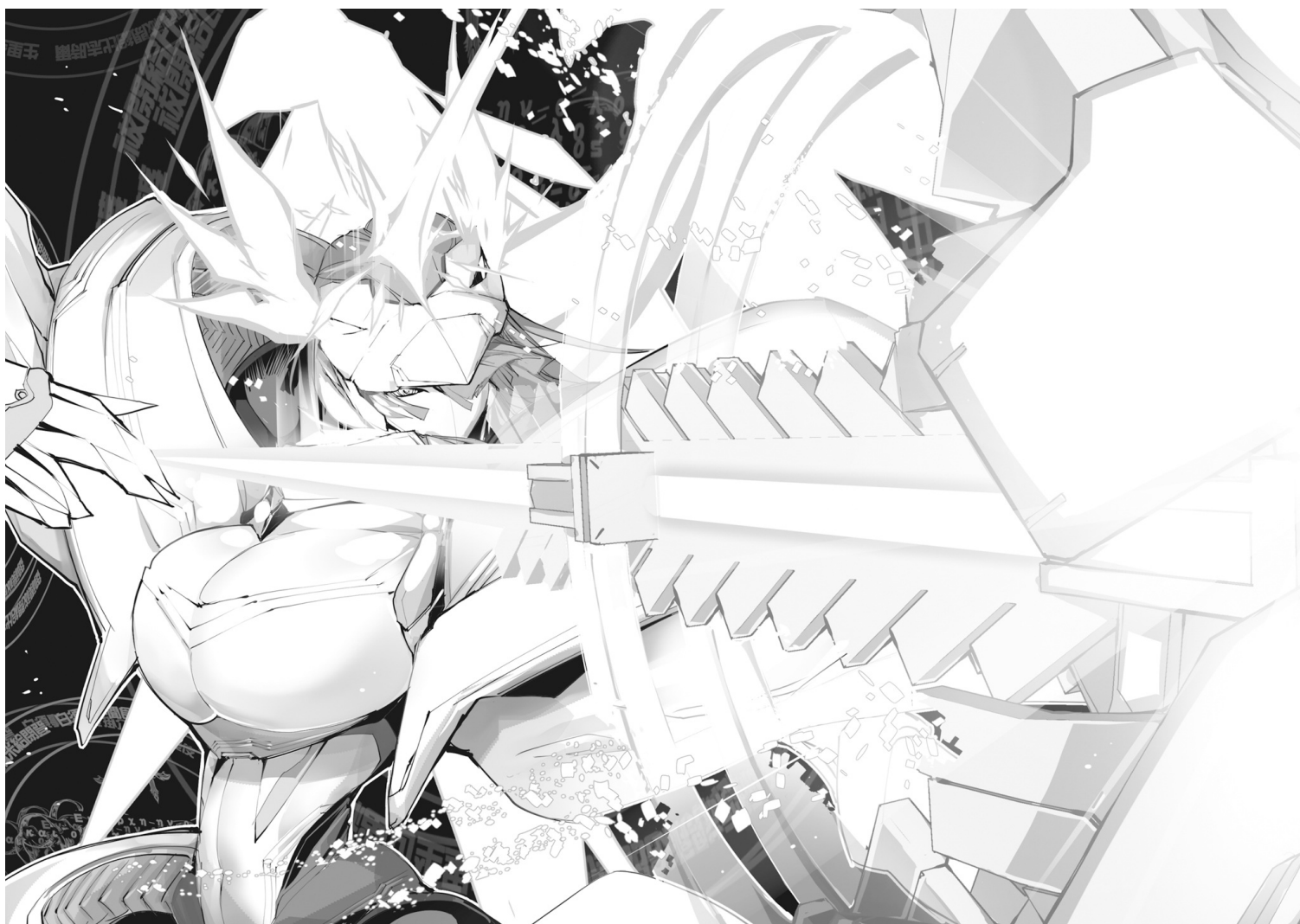
What kind of polite language is that? wondered Hunter as they used the heat of their Phlogiston Hearts to release the ether they had gathered.

They released it into the spread arms of the white Geo Frame.

“Bring out Akerindou!”

It was summoned as if in response to those words.

That giant vermilion and white bow was a Magino Device capable of scoring a bull’s-eye even at great distances.



The Black Witch recalled the night ten years before.

A similar scene had occurred during that Hexennacht too.

“Repeat material...!?”

She said that, but a part of her told her she was wrong.

Ten years before, the giant white Device had not had any companions.

That was different now.

This was someone with talent.

They were supported by the evolution of the world.

And they could surpass anything with the changes brought on by their companions.

If this was what this world had lacked ten years before...

“They got it right in the retake!?”

She raised her voice and sent her two blades toward the center of her vision. However...

“Shouko!”

The attack launched her way scored a direct hit.

The sounds of breaking metal and falling stones spread without end.

But Horinouchi realized the Black Witch was still hanging on.

It was not over yet.

Their opponent had not yet given in.

She stepped forward to defeat that opponent.

And someone else stepped forward alongside her.

“Are you sure, Horinouchi?”

“Sure about what?”

“In a way, I am dragging you into what should only be between my sister and me.”

“I don’t mind,” she said. “Remember what you said happened to your home in this imaginary world? That the building and everything else were blown away?”

But...

“Koutarou looked into it and I visited it myself. The house was inside a forest that you could oddly never enter from the road, but there was one part of the road from which you could see it...and that showed a scene of two sisters smiling and living together.”

That settled it.

“Our desires are the same.”

“Yes...if you insist on being my stalker, then I shall become your stalker as well.”

Shut up.

At any rate, the two of them stepped forward. They released the bow and reconstructed the sword.

Their opponent had fallen back a bit and ether light smoke was spewing from all over its body, but it had survived.

It bent back but then curled its body forward as if to hold in what it contained inside. And it used that momentum to attack.

It brought the twin swords together overhead and swung them down.

But Horinouchi and Kagami stepped forward.

They understood.

They were not alone here. Across the country and the world, everyone stepped forward in unison.

That witch's step struck the earth as one.

“Milady! ...This is the world's divine protection!”

Koutarou yelled over the transmission.

The movements of Kagami, Horinouchi, and the Geo Frame were being monitored by the US military via Hunter and Mary.

The Head Maid and the others here had gathered that data, taken the transmission lag time into account to predict the exact timing, and sent out the instruction for the step.

That instruction was spread to every part of the world that their will could reach: night or day, land or sky, solid footing or no footing at all.

“Let's do this, Head Butler...!” said the Head Maid. “The world's greatest witch

divine protection will assist Lady Mitsuru's step!"

Koutarou wondered how this would turn out, but he also thought about Horinouchi who had taken them this far.

"Well done, milady!"

Horinouchi smiled a little.

Was Koutarou relaying this battle to everyone?

That crucial step had been supported from the other side.

All the world's witches were telling them to keep going. They must have been thinking of her and Kagami while taking similar steps of resistance.

She was glad.

She simply stepped forward, while their opponent...

"Ahhhhhhh...!!"

Her attempt to endure the damage led to her greatest speed yet.

Horinouchi and Kagami were going to be hit first, but then Kagami spoke.

"Shouko." She simply spoke to their opponent. "I had a dream. I had a chance to review what we did so very long ago. And there is one thing I forgot to say."

Kagami smiled while countering the attack.

"Do you remember the many stories you showed me back then? It is about them..." She looked to her sister. "They were good. I could not bring myself to admit it at the time and that was wrong of me. The stories you wrote were good. I guarantee it. ...So how about you take better care of the things you create from now on? After all, they are a part of you."

"She said she had one thing to say, but didn't she just say a lot more than one thing!?" protested Amaze.

"That's just the kind of person she is...!"

Shouko thought to herself as she answered.

...I just can't win.

Her sister had apologized to her.

She had not asked Shouko to forgive her.

She had accepted Shouko's complex and then asked Shouko to place all responsibility on her.

She was a strong person, but Shouko understood that strength.

It was not just her strength. It came from being with other people. The more she was with someone else, the greater the possibilities of her imagination grew.

...I can't win.

And her sister had also said exactly what Shouko had desired.

"Amaze, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I understand. ...You want to take care of what you created instead of destroying it, don't you?"

"Yes."

She was still responsible for destroying all the previous worlds and she had her own personal issues, but her sister would accept her and had realized what she wanted to do. So...

"I can't help but desire it. ...It really isn't fair of me, is it?"

"Now, now, Shouko. It isn't unfair to desire something. ...What's unfair is desiring something but hiding that fact."

And...

"You desired something and you created it instead of hiding it. Where you went from there is where you differ from me. That is all." Amaze seemed to affirm her decision while continuing to attack. "I exist to create new things. If you want to create a world inside you and take good care of it, that will sometimes mean not prioritizing new things."

So...

“I might be obsolete.”

“Don’t you let my sister influence you too.”

“It’s fine,” said Amaze. “There is nothing new in a retake, but just as combining the ordinary can lead to creation, combining multiple retakes might just lead to something no one has ever achieved. That is not my method, but if you can make that method work...you will take over as creator after me.”

Amaze moved forward.

“So watch me. ...And if I do well, praise me.”

Kagami made an attack.

The enemy’s twin swords were held together and she sent the blade on an accurate path toward the center of those two blades as a counterattack that took advantage of the enemy’s movement and weight.

“Let us return everything to the way it was, Shouko. ...Back when we imagined, cried, laughed, and even felt anger.”

It hit, so it shattered the blades.

The attack broke through and opened the way, so they stepped forward again.

The white Geo Frame bisected the black Satanic Frame as if embracing it.

Chapter 16: Sink the Heavens

Chapter 16

“Sink the Heavens”



Say goodbye
To the sky you looked up into

Say goodbye

To the sky you looked up into

Light danced.

With the dark clouds in the sky, Horinouchi thought it looked like snow, even with the moon out.

As far as she could tell from the Geo Frame's chest, the light was falling all across Kantou. And starting from the band of planetary-level divine protection created on the surface...

"They're disappearing, aren't they?"

The Black Witch's reinforcements were crumbling.

Everything came to a stop and seemed to melt away. Once their bodies had collapsed about halfway, they broke apart into ether light.

There were some in the sky that had yet to fall, but they scattered into light in midair.

"Oh, my."

When she looked far into the distance, the band of light spread out like a curtain from east to west.

Hexennacht was over and the glowing curtain was closing.

It was a strange sight.

"Even the giant Black Device and those dragons and dolls become ether light once they break apart."

She then looked over at Kagami.

Kagami held a girl in her arms. That girl who wore a black Form was the being they had called the Black Witch. But now...

"Is your sister all right?"

"She was always much more peaceful while asleep. And peaceful is probably what she plans to be now. But..."

Kagami placed her sister in a cradle made from a spell circle.

Horinouchi knew what Kagami wanted to do.

There was something they had left undone.

She looked directly overhead, toward the moon. The full moon still hung in the center of the heavens.

“Since the moon has not moved from that spot, it must not be my sister’s doing.”

They saw a line of light as they looked up.

“It is the Book of Creation.”

I need to land somewhere higher up next time I drop down onto it, thought Hunter as she climbed up onto the Geo Frame’s chest stage.

She was of course using her Normal Frame, but so was Mary who had also climbed up.

And after exchanging a glance, they heard a voice from above.

“Did you save Shouko!?”

Fleur jumped toward them with a light step and she was oddly full of energy.

But then she opened a spell circle connected to the Shihouin Academy HQ.

“It’s the Book of Creation!” said Lisbeth. “Can you see it!?”

Damn right they could see it. It seemed to be making sure they could not avoid seeing its glowing ascent.

“That book...is on Shouko’s side, right?”

But if they did not do anything, this really would get serious, even if it was *only pretending*.

“It intends to escape to the moon and seal itself once more!” said Lisbeth. “That way we cannot interfere until it finds a new imaginer.”

Would that really be so bad? thought Hunter, but she knew that was being naïve.

“Anyone the Book of Creation chooses would be a creator who only ever chooses what’s new, wouldn’t it?”

“That is correct, ...It was created in the world’s dawning age, so there would have been nothing in the world and it would have been acceptable to only desire for what is new.” Kagami shut her eyes just once. “But now the world is a richer place and needs to do things differently, so the Book of Creation no longer fits in.”

So...

“Let us send it back. ...This world has surpassed imagination, so let us return that power of creation to the ley lines so that it might become one with everything. That is what we must do as those who will live out the new way of doing things.”

Kagami nodded.

Hunter, Mary, Fleur, and Horinouchi formed a ring with her and raised their hands.

“Let us bring an end to the illusions and misunderstandings of imagination that cross all the many worlds.”

“Yes,” agreed Horinouchi. “From now on, Hexennacht will be a night worth remembering.”

Koutarou saw the Geo Frame standing in Tokyo Bay change form.

...Is that...?

It had used the Knight-style before, but now six giant wings grew from its back. And instead of folding up, they spread out in the air behind it. As for the front of the Geo Frame...

“It’s more subdued...?”

“No, Head Butler! It’s getting even flashier!”

“That’s the Princess-style! I’ve never seen it before, but it has to be!”

“You don’t get fashion at alllll, do you? The Head Maid is going to have a lot of trouble from now on, isn’t she?”

“What does any of this have to do with me!?” protested the Head Maid.

But more importantly, the six-winged Princess-style Geo Frame stood tall within the storm of ether light snow falling in the night. The weapon it raised was the weapon that had once pierced the Black Witch’s hand as it approached from the moon.

“An arbalest made by combining Dikaiosyne with Akerindou!”

The weapon was six-times larger than back then and the princess raised it toward the sky with both arms.

It looked like an angel lifting a cross.

Koutarou looked to the others. The Head Maid used a karate chop to silence a maid that was about to jump the gun and then she gave everyone a commanding look.

With the others behind him, Koutarou lightly spun his arms around and then raised them.

“Well done, milady...!”

“Well done! Well done, Horinouchi. Oh, come to think of it, I never called you Manko this time! I need to do better than that, sorry! How about using it as the signal for firing!?”

“Can you please keep your eyes on the sky!?”

Amaze saw something at a point on the earth far below.

A phenomenon greater than a mere spell was underway and targeting Amaze. And there they were.

It was Shouko’s sister and her companions.

“Are you sure?” it asked. “If you destroy ‘me’, every single world will lose the

benefit of creation. That will delay the development of humanity. Can you really accept that!?”

“I can!”

She did not hesitate to answer.

That’s incredible, it honestly thought. *She is even more decisive than Shouko said.*

So Amaze waited for her words while continuing to fly.

And her responding will reached it in the form of words.

“We now see imagination as something real, even without turning it into creation.”

But...

“You claim imagination is mere fiction and you value imagination while also throwing it out instead of taking care of it, so your role has ended!”

So...

“From now on, remain in this world and use that divine protection of creation to protect everything, you guardian of humanity!”

It saw light rising from that point on the earth.

The attack was directed straight toward it. This was an attack greater than imagination and it was more powerful than everything Shouko and Amaze’s previous owners had accumulated.

...I see.

Amaze only now accepted that this girl was Shouko’s sister.

“Guardian of humanity, hm?”

There was no greater praise.

The attack pierced the heavens and the blast pushed Tokyo Bay down to the very bottom.

Shihouin Academy had defense barriers up, but the pier and surrounding

water were blown away and the mud of the ocean bottom burst with enough force to splatter onto the barriers and bounce off again.

Tokyo Bay's coast was using all of its anti-wave spells and tsunami-protection technology. A cylinder of light seemed to surround the stage where the Geo Frame's attack reached the moon.

The shell broke through the Book of Creation and crashed into the moon.

It hit.

The moon changed form.

The white satellite bent as if being pushed away from the earth, split around the swollen peak, and then shrank in size.

After everything was compressed to about two-thirds its size, the shell's power had nowhere else to go, so it finally carved away at the surface.

It tore into the moon and simply attempted to pierce straight through it.

There was a house at the location of the hit, but it was shattered and everything was smashed to pieces by that mortar.

All that remained was for that force to reach the core.

It only took an instant.

As if shifting its orbit, the crushed moon shook in the direction of the earth's rotation, but it could not withstand the strain and lost its form.

It exploded.

Amaze was reminded of old times in the instant it lost its shape.

Even as it was destroyed, it did not forget the engineer who had produced it or a certain conversation held in front of a fireplace one night.

That was after it had already lost its form as stone slabs but before it had gained its final form. At that time, it had just been made into a book.

Its master had been an unselfish person, but he had been interested in books and had worked with Amaze to create technologies for producing and

publishing books.

After completing a few such technologies, Amaze had realized that he no longer had any desires.

But it had thought this master was the most knowledgeable and thoughtful of any it had had before, so it had done one thing before returning to sleep.

“I want to know about the future.”

That was something Amaze could not imagine.

“Master...at what time would I no longer be needed?”

That conversation wasn't actually in Japanese, was it? I think I'm altering the memory after spending so much time with Shouko.

But whatever language it was in, Amaze's master had definitely given this reply:

“That would have to be far, far into the future.”

“Well, yes, I suppose so.”

“No, I am not just talking about a length of time.”

What did that mean?

“It would have to happen for a reason that neither of us can imagine. The world would have to have grown rich enough to establish a reason we cannot accept. At a time like that, people like that would be born from the old things and not just the new things. It would have to be a cycle or a system with greater complexity.”

“You mean...?”

“The world would be overflowing with creations and a diversity of value systems would exist.” Amaze's master had smiled. “I have no idea when a time like that would arrive, but you should feel proud when it does. Because it would be your presence that allowed the world to develop that far.”

It had then gone to sleep. The next thing it had known, it was busy granting a certain girl's desires.

Just now, the world had surpassed it. And not just the new things, but the old

things, the common things, and everything else.

...Yes.

If everything had the potential to create new things, then its role was over.

“Book of Creation,” said Shouko’s sister. “Return to the ley lines. And we will meet again somewhere. Next time, I hope we can do something together with you in your new form and new role.”

“I see,” it said.

Its role was complete. But it would not disappear or be lost. It would return to the world it had created and be born again. And if it could hope for another life...

“Shouko.”

It too had something to say. It had to do with the many stories it had experienced with that girl.

“It was fun...to the very end.”

What were you supposed to say when the conclusion left you hoping the next story would be just as enjoyable?

Chapter 17: Oh, Unforgettable Moonlit Night

Chapter 17

“Oh, Unforgettable Moonlit Night”



I can't repair my heart in time
And I can't gather up everything that spilled out

I can't repair my heart in time

And I can't gather up everything that spilled out

Pieces of the moon scattered in the night sky like the milky way.

Dawn gradually arrived.

Hexennacht was over.

And as the morning light shined on the Geo Frame's chest, Kagami stood with the light behind her and Shouko's cradle by her side. She looked back toward the others.

"Everyone."

Only after calling out to them did she realize the morning sun was visible through her body.

The sunlight was faintly passing through her.

"It would certainly be a problem if my insides or some more arousing areas showed through."

"I think we'll be fine as long as the contents of your mind don't show through."

She had to smile bitterly at Horinouchi's comment, but one thing was certain.

...So this is goodbye.

She would leave this world.

Her sister had lost her power and the Book of Creation was gone. She and her sister had been bound here by those things, so they would leave this imaginary world and return to the real world.

They would wake from the dream.

"I want to scold Shouko for going with an 'it was all a dream' ending, but maybe that is not the best idea."

She saw that Shouko too was growing transparent.

Horinouchi must have realized the time to say goodbye was approaching fast because she canceled her Frame.

The Geo Frame slowly fell apart, but it was so large that there was plenty of time before it entirely vanished. Kagami also canceled her Frame and returned to her normal appearance.

Then Horinouchi appeared right in front of her.

“This is goodbye, isn’t it?”

“Lose something and you will come across it again later. Look at it like that for now, Mitsuru.”

“Yes.” She nodded and smiled a little. “It isn’t often you use my actual name.”

“You wanted me to call you Manko that badly...!?”

She glared at Kagami.

But Kagami did not let it bother her.

“But Horinouchi...I thought you had something to say to me before I left. What is it?”

“...Eh!?”

Horinouchi suddenly blushed and froze in place, so Kagami walked all the way around her.

“In the hospital...yes, I do believe I heard something like that.”

She added another “yes”.

“For battle purposes, you should probably start using lipstick that does not come off quite so easily.”

...After everything, I have to deal with this!?

Hunter and the others were whispering something behind the other two.

“See, she’s like a wolf...”

“She’s a lot more proactive than I thought...”

“Eh!? Won’t we be in a lot of trouble if Shouko finds out!?”

Shut up, all of you. And I certainly didn’t expect things to turn out like this.

But she wanted to fight it here.

“I will not say it. Saying it now would only make me regret it more.”

“In that case, there is something I would like to say. ...Horinouchi, could you lean in here for a moment?”

“For what?”

She followed Kagami’s beckoning and leaned forward.

And Kagami kissed her.

She heard an “ah” and an “oh”, but that was meaningless.

Tears spilled from her eyes, but Kagami would not allow it. She pushed against her lips even harder and Horinouchi responded in kind. And...

“Ah.”

They pulled back for air at the exact same moment and more tears fell.

She wiped them away with her hand.

“You idiot. ...Now there’s no way I can forget.”

Because...

“...I can’t believe we were thinking the same thing.”

“That is why I chose you, Horinouchi.”

Kagami looked her in the eye with tears in the corners of her eyes as well.

“I chose you to laugh, cry, and grow angry with. ...And it does not matter even if you do forget me. I will always be with you whenever you laugh, cry, or grow angry.”

Kagami picked up her sister.

It was time to say goodbye. Horinouchi could still feel the heat on her lips as Kagami smiled and opened her mouth.

In that instant, Horinouchi nodded and spoke her own words. So did everyone behind her.

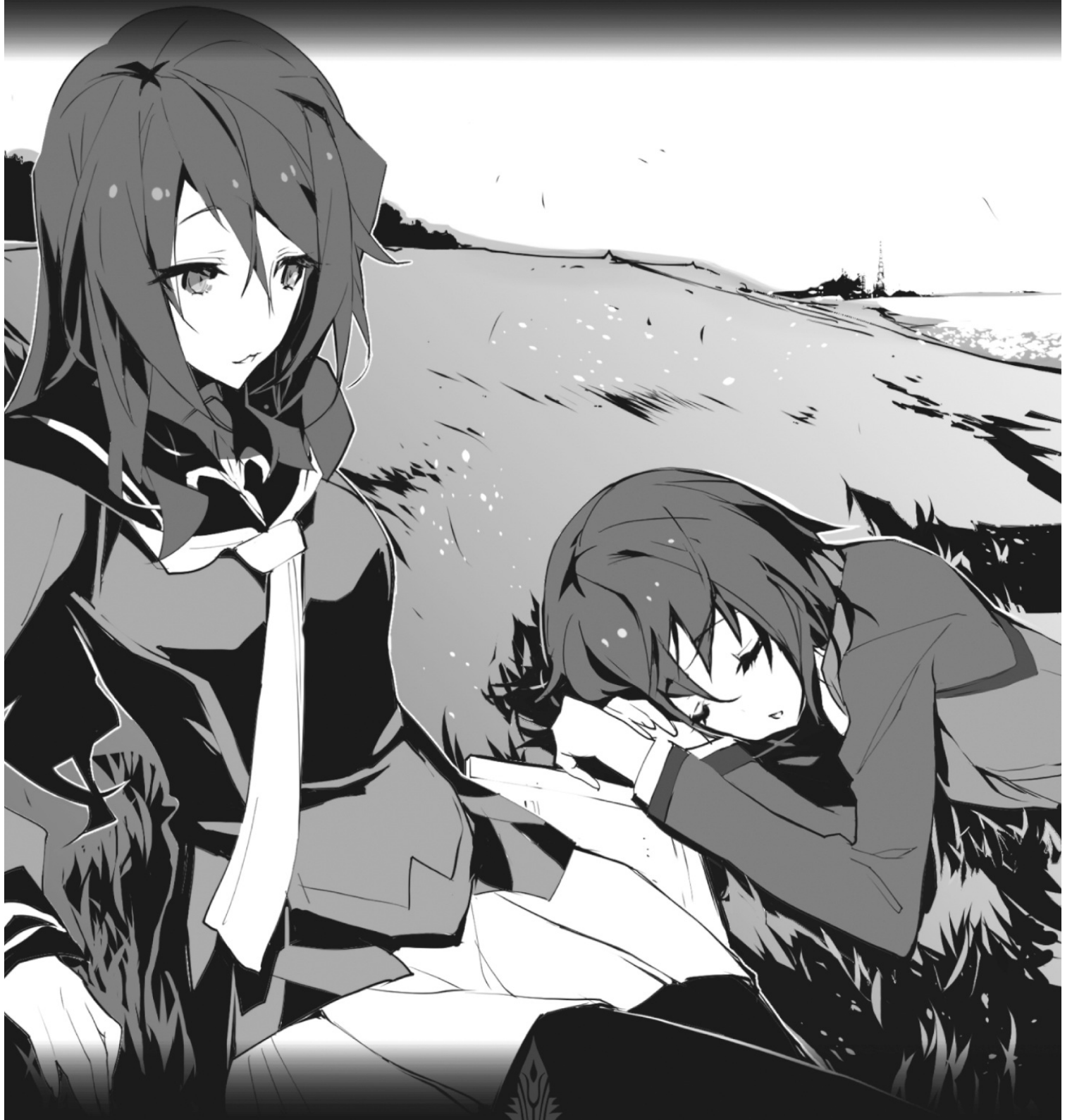
“You have my thanks.”

She heard Kagami's voice join theirs, but was that just as an illusion as she disappeared?

Final Chapter: A Place of Memories

Final Chapter

“A Place of Memories”



That is me, who can establish anything
Just by believing in it

That is me, who can establish anything

Just by believing in it

Kagami woke up.

Her body felt horribly heavy and slanted. Of course it was.

“The usual riverbank...”

When she went to meet her sister, if her sister was feeling well, they would come here to enjoy some snacks and to talk.

When she got up, she noticed her hair color.

It was black. Not white.

“Almost like I never went through all that hardship.”

She breathed in and found she truly was below the Yokohama sky. The city air had the usual scent and the riverbank’s grass covered damp soil.

This same place had existed in the world she had just left, but this was the one she “knew”.

No, she had also known the place she had just left.

She suddenly remembered someone with whom she had just said goodbye, so she wiped her eyes with her school uniform’s sleeve.

And she realized something:

“Shihouin Academy’s uniform was the same as my high school’s...”

Shouko had designed that world, so it made sense that Kagami was enrolled at that school.

Oh, whoops, she thought when she found herself thinking of herself in terms of that world.

It had only lasted about half a year, but it had deeply influenced her.

This was reality.

She found it was evening. In her school uniform, she had awoken from a

dream on the riverbank slope and she sat up.

“Shouko.”

She looked to the side and saw her sister sleeping in her middle school uniform.

She had not collapsed; she had fully surrendered to the sleepiness brought on by the warm sunbeam. It was cute how her knees were raised and held together as a remnant of trying to stay awake by holding her knees.

...Good.

She could confirm the truth of what had happened once Shouko woke up.

And from there, the question will be whether or not I want to believe it.

“Oh.”

Then she spotted a book between her and Shouko.

She first thought of the Book of Creation, but it was a notebook instead. She flipped through it in a bit of a hurry.

...An idea notebook.

It contained the ideas for Shouko’s new story. Kagami saw designs for a few swords and weapons as well as terms like Normal Frame and Magino Frame.

As she flipped through it, a few tears dripped down and she laughed.

“How serious were you taking this, Shouko?”

But seeing that gave her memories more clarity.

She remembered the many battles and the everyday life, she smiled bitterly at her behavior, and she believed it all as true.

It was *like* she had had a long dream.

Yes, all of that had been real.

“Honestly...and when I have my entrance exam coming up this year.”

Just as she sighed to calm herself, she heard a sudden voice from the top of the riverbank.

“Oh? Then you’ll have to get studying, won’t you?”

...Huh?

It was a familiar voice, but it should not have been here. Kagami hesitantly looked back toward the top of the riverbank.

And she called the girl’s name.

“Manko?”

“That nickname...! Are you sure you aren’t having issues with your memory!?”

It was not just her. Everyone from her memories was there: Hunter, Mary, Koutarou, the Head Maid, the other maids, Lisbeth, and more.

Mary looked her in the eye and gestured like she was opening a door. That meant...

...Did she unlock it!?

That was the technique that had once separately sent Kagami and Mary from one world to another.

Mary had made it her own.

And they were all laughing: “Ha ha.”

Horinouchi took a step toward Kagami and extended a hand.

“Look, Kagami. ...This might make taking your entrance exam difficult.”

“What might?”

Kagami took her hand and looked in the same direction as Horinouchi: the sky.

Behind them, giant forms flew through the evening sky which should have only contained the city’s buildings.

“Ohh, giant dragons...!”

Hunter was exactly right.

...Huh?

A group of dragons measuring more than 100m long flew toward the ocean.

And while her sister started to stir and Fleur ran down the riverbank's steps to greet her, Kagami turned her back on the evening background to face Horinouchi.

All the while, Devices resembling giant ships flew through the sky and traffic control witches blew whistles from the roads as they accelerated.

"What is this...?"

"It must have been the Book of Creation. ...By releasing everything accumulated within it, the lost worlds can also be 'taken care of'. Or that's how I see it."

And...

"If there is more than one world, they can come together, influence each other, and become something greater than anyone could imagine."

While the dragons roared in the sky, Hunter placed Dikaio on Kagami's shoulder.

There was no moon in the sky. Was it just not out at the moment, or was it not there at all? As Kagami wondered if this was another form of influence, Horinouchi took her hand.

"Now."

After looking over at Shouko who had woken, Horinouchi turned to face Kagami.

"Yes," agreed Kagami. She only needed an instant to make up her mind, so she held Horinouchi's in return and she spoke. "Let us continue. And if we are no longer needed, instead of throwing ourselves out or disappearing...let us move on to the next thing. That way, we will never reach the end, Horinouchi."



—This is the correct answer, you know?

So without fearing anything, they pressed their foreheads together and smiled.

They had been thinking the same thing, so they nodded, let go of each other's hand, and moved their arms.

“—————”

They embraced. They stored something undeniable in each other and formed words.

“Now, let us move on to the next story...together.”

Oh, the rest of you stay quiet for now. Do not ruin the moment.

—This is the correct answer, you know?

Afterword

And that was Clash of Hexennacht Volume 4, the final volume.

Well, then. I had originally planned this as three volumes, but it was well received and I ended up finishing it at the fourth volume. Being able to write this much is a luxury. Thank you very much.

This was a very busy two years, but Tsurugi-san's manga version will release its final volume at the same time, so I hope you will pick it up as well.

I think shorter series like this might be best for Obstacle. After all, it feels like a place where I can keep the footwork lighter. (Although that depends on what exactly I'm making.)

But Yokohama in the real world has changed quite a lot. You often hear about crowds turning up for social network games and what you see there seems to change every few years. Change really is the standard theme of the city of Westernization, or any port town really.

I also visit Shinagawa a lot, but Shinagawa was where Japan's railways originated. It all began with the test opening of the line from Shinagawa to Yokohama (Sakuragi-cho) in 1872 and it really began to spread after (parts of) the Yamanote Line were added on in 1885. If Kagami's family was a well-off family in the Yokohama region, they would have been very familiar with the railway and I think Shouko would have prioritized that information over knowledge of the city center.

I think the Kagami family was in the mountains because they moved there during World War Two, but that's because of the history and general feel of the Yokohama and Kawasaki region.

Now for the chat.

"You can talk about magical girls now."

"I've never seen any of those."

“Isn’t there anything similar in your memories? Something that could fit a broad definition of a magical girl?”

“Lady Haman?”

“...Not quite. If we accept that, things like Wonder Woman would have to count, too.”

“But...y’know, Lady Haman uses her familiar to fill the worthless with holes. And she’s got that aura. Not to mention the pharaoh-style haircut.”

“I will admit she wouldn’t look out of place playing card games on a motorcycle or board.”

“Isn’t a magical girl you can call ‘Lady’ a wonderful thing?”

Why don’t you realize how weird that is? Anyway, my work background music this time was Heavy Line (MT-32 Version) from Granada. That’s a really old STG, but the music was primarily done by Sakuraba Motoi and you can really feel the heroism in that Sakuraba tune.

Anyway, I’ll leave you with this question: “Who was imagining the most?”

I think Girls Talk should be next.

January 2017. A somewhat chilly morning.

-Kawakami Minoru

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Kagami usually means mirror, but her family name spells it differently.
2. ↑ Change the “ta” to a “chi” and it sounds like “severed penis”.

Gekitotsu no Hexennacht - Volume 04

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